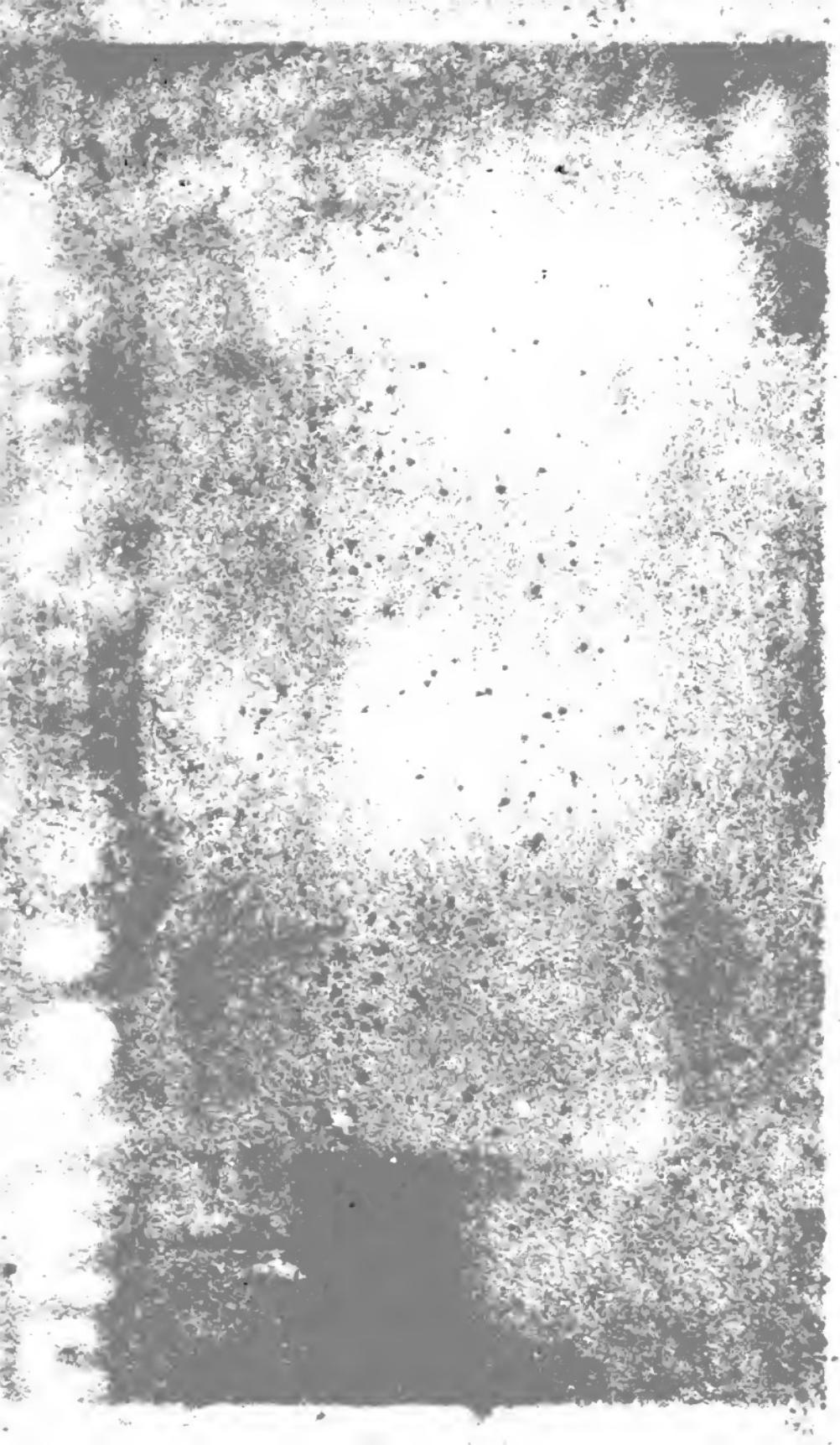




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THE INTERIOR

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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"At least I have my father," said Jane, irrelevantly.
(Chapter VII.)

The Interior]

[Frontispiece]

THE INTERIOR

BY

LINDSAY RUSSELL

Author of

"The Years of Forgetting," "Souls in Pawn," "The Eternal Triangle," etc. etc.

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
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THE INTERIOR.

CHAPTER I.

"**A**ND the Boy?" asked old Lady Anne Deerwood, sipping her tea delicately, and blinking her old weak eyes at the girl opposite. "Tell me the truth of this absurd rumour about him."

"It all depends on what the rumour in question is," said Muriel Cartwright, with her usual languid sweetness. She shrugged her silk-clad shoulders. "Can I help you to cake, Lady Anne?"

They sat in an alcove formed by a deep window and a mass of hot-house palms. Muriel Cartwright had designed that corner specially.

In the foreground a deep basket-chair with a pile of pale blue cushions had been carefully placed, but not specially for Lady Anne Deerwood.

Behind them the long lofty rooms of the

Cartwrights' house in Portman Square which had been transformed, for the nonce, into a picture gallery, were filled with a fashionable throng. A buzz of chatter rose and fell. The faint, pleasant rattle of tea-cups intermingled with the light laughter of women and the deeper notes of men's voices.

Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright fluttered about the room, rosy with success, and a *soupcon* of rouge, and garbed in a costume especially designed to grace the occasion, and artistically suggestive—in its fashionable colouring and design—of Joseph's coat of many colours.

Somewhere in the background skulked the artist. He had not long hair or Byronic features, or the figure of Apollo or of a matinée idol, so already, as far as a gaily-dressed, sensation-seeking world was concerned, he had passed into the limbo of forgotten things.

The walls were lined with canvasses, pasted here and there with cheerful white labels from which in red flashed forth the magic word "Sold." Mrs. Cartwright's protégé, in the terse but illuminating parlance of Bohemia, had had a very good day indeed.

Down near the secluded, and temporarily deserted, corner of the room where Lady Anne and the hostess's daughter sat, hung one of the most ambitious efforts of the artist, and before it, for quite a while, an elderly, grey-haired man had paused, evidently absorbed in rapt contemplation. Muriel glanced pensively at the blue-cushioned chair.

Lady Deerwood peered over her glasses and blinked at the elderly, grey-haired man for a moment, and then glanced thoughtfully back at Muriel Cartwright's self-conscious face. The short-sighted eyes blinked more rapidly.

"That's the sardine man, isn't it?" she said, with her dreaded and characteristic bluntness of speech. "Is that his purchase he is lingering over? I should have thought his instincts were dictated more by heart than art. There isn't any art on his tins, anyway. I buy his sardines, so I know." She looked at him again, and added: "Um! I must say he makes a better Sardiner than knight."

Muriel Cartwright flushed. She thought Lady Anne a terrible old woman.

"It is Sir Julian Wright," she said coldly.

Lady Anne chuckled.

"They knighted him while I was on the Continent, didn't they? In these days they should do away with the Order of the Garter, and substitute the Order of the Fish-tin and the Soap-box; or, less trouble still, in this era, Muriel, it would be better to circulate a printed list of titles—and the price. Reduced rates, of course, for all near relatives of the Government."

Sir Julian had left the seascape at last, and was making a short and desperate detour in their direction. Lady Anne watched his progression grimly. She blinked thoughtfully, as Muriel made her way with apparent carelessness to the window and, after standing a moment, sat down again.

Muriel leaned gracefully back in the rush-chair, blue cushions behind her golden head. All the sunlight that was left of the afternoon came through the window behind her and shone on that daintily-coiffured head. She looked young and very sweet, and *ingénue*. One could well imagine a man losing his heart over her.

Lady Anne thought grimly of a boy who was not in this room, and, if rumour were true, not in England. He had loved this girl with her long-lashed, appealing eyes, and her unmistakable beauty. He had once told Lady Anne that the girl loved him, and that he was going to work for her and fight for a place in the world.

Lady Anne had smiled her inscrutable smile. She was an old woman who had lived many years and seen many things. She had hoped she would live long enough to see the boy's infatuation die.

She thought she knew Muriel Cartwright; but because Lady Anne was fond of the boy she had said nothing. She knew that opposition only fans the flame.

She looked thoughtfully now at the girl, still leaning gracefully back in her chair, but tapping her long white fingers a little impatiently on the dainty table. Now and again Muriel Cartwright glanced as if without interest in the direction of Sir Julian, who had been transfixed by the beauty of another canvas not far away in a direct line with the window.

Lady Anne wondered if he saw it. She thought it more likely that he saw instead the picture of the

girl at the window with the late sunlight in her hair and a pile of blue cushions arranged artistically behind her.

"Is it true, then," said Lady Anne, after a pause, and reverting to her original topic, "that the Boy has left for some heathen country? And why? And when?"

Miss Cartwright answered the last question with suspiciously cheerful readiness. "About six months ago, dear Lady Anne. You were on the Continent, but you would of course hear of his uncle's absurd marriage—at such an advanced age too. Every one was so sorry. It was really wicked of that old man to marry, and so render the succession doubtful." She shuddered daintily. "An actress, too, Lady Anne. Think of it, an old, old family like that—"

"We all date back to Adam and Eve, if it comes to that," Lady Anne retorted; "and anyhow, I don't think the Boy would wait for dead men's shoes. There's something fine in him, if one digs deep."

Muriel Cartwright shrugged her shoulders, and cast down her long-lashed eyes. She studied the tea-cup nervously, for Sir Julian Wright was making his way straight towards them, and one never knew what this terrible old woman might say.

The terrible old woman was saying placidly: "And so he has gone out to make his way in the world! To the colonies, I suppose. But what does he intend to do? Salmon-fishing in Canada," a trifle sarcastically, "or gold-digging in Australia?"

"Neither, I believe," murmured Miss Cartwright coldly. She resented old Lady Anne's deliberate reference to fish in the presence of Sir Julian. She knew that Lady Anne disliked Sir Julian; indeed, any of the new aristocracy. Perhaps now, with Sir Julian Wright's entry into their circle, she would go.

But Lady Anne apparently was in no hurry. She acknowledged Sir Julian's bow frostily, after taking nearer view of him from her lorgnette.

"But you haven't told me, Muriel, what Lionel Warde is doing at present."

Two vivid spots of wavering colour came into the girl's face. Sir Julian, who had taken a chair beside her, had looked up sharply. Miss Cartwright's pulses beat fast and angrily. She sat there outwardly gracious and calm, inwardly furious and perturbed. She did not admire bluntness or directness of speech. She thought it rude and entirely unnecessary. The house of cards she had built so carefully in the last few weeks was in danger of the strong wind of Lady Anne's bluntness. "Whatever did mother invite her for?" she said to herself in a cold fury, forgetting that in the past, just perched on the first rungs of the shaky ladder of social progress she had assiduously courted this old woman who represented the Old Guard of English society.

She lifted her long lashes and looked into the peering short-sighted eyes behind the glasses. For one instant their glance held Muriel's suddenly cold and defiant.

" You were asking about—Mr. Warde, dear Lady Anne," she said very sweetly, but the slow, languid shrug of her shoulders was a trifle impertinent. " He is seeking for pearls of fabulous wealth, I believe. You should ask mother all about it. Mr. Warde was so very fond of mother." She seemed to be explaining the latter to Sir Julian as well as answering.

" H'm ! Thank you, Muriel," said Lady Anne ; " I had an idea you would know, you see." She rose stiffly, disregarding Miss Cartwright's efforts to turn the conversation. " While I was away," she said, " some one or other wrote and told me that you and Lionel Warde were engaged."

" One hears so many rumours," murmured Miss Cartwright. The long lashes veiled her eyes for a moment, and a duller red swept over her cheeks. It may have been of anger.

Lady Anne, who was counted shrewd, told herself that it was certainly not of pleasure or embarrassment. The latter was an emotion she accused neither Miss Cartwright nor her mother of possessing.

" If such a thing had been true," said Miss Cartwright deliberately, and at least one of her listeners knew now that she spoke to both of them, " if that had been true, dear Lady Anne, you would have seen the printed announcement most surely."

Lady Anne had risen. Leaning heavily on her stick, she prepared for departure.

" Oh, the papers !" said she. " Is there no such a thing nowadays as a secret engagement ? "

The girl shrugged her slim shoulders.

"They are not quite fashionable nowadays, are they?"

She too had risen; she stood leaning a little over the rush back of her chair, smiling a farewell to Lady Anne. Her lips set, but the smile was still in her eyes as she turned back to Sir Julian.

"Lady Anne is a really terrible old woman," she said softly to him; "she says such things too, without the slightest foundation."

Sir Julian Wright was not young, and he did not wear his clothes well. His hair, iron-grey at the temples, surmounted a heavy face not unhandsome, but certainly inclined to be coarse. His eyes kindled as he looked at Muriel Cartwright. The desire of possession surged suddenly over him.

"Then—it was not true," he said. His speech was rather halting. "I—well, I heard a rumour also. I heard it from several people, but I preferred not to believe it unless you yourself told me."

She looked back at him, her long fair lashes uplifted. Her eyes, of a beautiful if cold hazel, showed half surprise, half appeal. Her pale gown clung about her, emphasising her slenderness and grace of outline, and she spread out her little white ringless hands in a charming gesture of denial.

"Oh, Sir Julian!" she said, hurriedly, and there was soft appeal in her voice now as well as in her eyes. "There is no truth in the rumour, but may I tell you about it? We—are—such friends, aren't we?"

She did not wait for an answer, but her eyes went to the long window to the glimpse of a stone balcony without. It was deserted.

"I would so like to confide in some one," she said, faltering shyly. He found the mute appeal of her eyes irresistible. How innocent and charming she was, he thought. They passed out by a side door on to the balcony.

Lady Anne, at the other end of the room, making her way with difficulty through the laughing and chattering throng to Mrs. Cartwright, saw them go. A curious expression came over her old, withering face.

"What is this I hear about Lionel?" she said, a little sharply to Mrs. Cartwright. "Muriel tells me you hear from him."

Mrs. Cartwright looked up in surprise, and was betrayed into indiscretion.

"No; he writes to Muriel, though, Lady Anne. She will tell you all about it. I am sure she will be only too pleased. You were rather fond of Mr. Warde, I remember, Lady Anne. But then of course you would hear personally. You saw so much of him."

"I have heard nothing."

"Muriel gets a letter every mail." Mrs. Cartwright lowered her voice confidentially. "Of course, there can be nothing in it now."

"Of course," agreed Lady Anne non-committally.

"The dear boy has such absurd ideas of makin' a fortune," Mrs. Cartwright said in her hurried way. She had a habit of slurring all her words into one sentence and dropping her "g's," which her friends

declared most fascinating. "Australia is a weird place from all one hears, cannibals and kangaroos and things. And just fancy, Lady Anne, a man who came from there told me that tram-cars of the most primitive type were still to be found there, directly modelled from the Ark of Noah. Sounds ever so queer, doesn't it?"

"It does," said Lady Anne patiently.

"There's fortunes in gold and sheep, especially the latter, and if they're dead and are tinned. Do you like tinned goods, Lady Anne?" She gave a little fastidious shudder.

"Apparently Muriel does," said Lady Anne.

Mrs. Cartwright, unnoticing, ran volubly on like a freshly-wound clock. At last she ran down, and Lady Anne seized her opportunity.

"So he has gone seeking for a fortune in pearls or tinned sheep. Humph! the Boy goes, and, hey presto! enters Sir Julian with a fortune already made. One might make a wretched pun by calling it a sardonic trick of Fate."

Mrs. Cartwright flushed.

Lady Anne was rude, but then Lady Anne, with her unassailable position in Society, and her immense wealth, could afford to be rude. Mrs. Cartwright wisely remembered that Lady Anne could make or break any one socially if she chose. She had chosen three years ago to make the Cartwrights for some reason never explained.

Mrs. Cartwright, following at this exact moment Lady Anne's gaze, saw Muriel and Sir Julian pass out through the side door to the terrace.

"Muriel is a fool," said Mrs. Cartwright to herself angrily; "with nothing at all settled and she may be making a mistake about Sir Julian."

But Muriel, in spite of her innocence of manner, was a young woman who made few mistakes. She stood leaning against the balustrading of the balcony, looking out over the gardens beneath, and the shining stream of water that showed beyond.

The sky was paling and the sun was waning in strength. Autumn was passing swiftly, and winter on its way: another season that passing away took its toll of beauty and freshness. She shivered as she stood there in her thin silk gown.

"I am not cold," she declared hastily as her companion made an exclamation.

He had put out his hand and it rested on hers. After a swift glance at his face she left it there. Her hand fluttered under his.

"Will you tell me—about Warde?" he said.

She began suddenly to speak, turning her eyes away from that shining strip of water, the old, old Thames, with its many memories.

Perhaps she remembered how many a time at this hour she and another had looked over the gardens and the river from this secluded balcony, and had watched the shining water grow blurred and dim. Far away on that shining water black barges were drifting down stream towards the City. Mists were gathering over it, and the smoke-like clouds deepening.

Often she and another had stood there, late in the

evening, when the gardens were a dark, intervening blur and a myriad of yellow lights flickered along the Thames-water curving down to the ways of the City. If a memory tugged at her heart-strings now she repressed it. She was passionately tired of genteel poverty, of the struggle to keep up appearances, of unpaid bills and attendant discomforts.

A night in last year another man, holding her slim white hands, and looking down at her, had said, in that farewell of his :

“ When I come back I will deck you in pearls—the purest of jewels, sweetheart, the most wonderful of all gems. For you are wonderful of all women, the sweetest and the fairest. To think you are content to wait—that you will be waiting——”

Abruptly she turned her back on such memories. It was all very well, she told herself in passionate rebellion against Fate, to look forward to a love-match in the days when only one ageing life stood between Lionel Warde and wealth and position.

But six months ago that old, infatuated man had married a young actress. That very afternoon a rumour had been circulated through the gay room behind her, with many whisperings, significant nods of heads, and half-laughter.

Some one had remarked what a lucky thing it was that Muriel was still free. It would have been so distressing.

So it was that a little later at the tea-table in the alcove, Muriel Cartwright had spread out her white ringless hands, and in the quaint pocket of her gown

lay the little ring of pearls a man had given her as a lucky omen of a wonderful future that would never be.

Now out on the balcony, leaning a little forward, her beautiful profile cut clearly against the greying day, Muriel Cartwright was speaking lightly, lying daintily, with many shruggings of her silk-clad shoulders.

"Of course, Sir Julian, I cannot hide the fact that —Mr. Warde admired me. Every one knew that, so I am breaking no confidence in speaking of it. I never looked at it in a serious light. I have no brother, as you know," the upward glance of her eyes was very appealing, "and I looked on him always as a brother, but nothing more. I knew nothing of Love."

"I am glad," he said gravely. He glanced back at the room behind, now beginning slowly to empty.

"May I come to-night," he went on, "and ask you a question I have wanted to ask you for a long time?"

She was very still, leaning there. He saw only her delicate profile, the long marcelled wave of her shining hair, her head bent thoughtfully, very temptingly near.

"Muriel," he said in a half-whisper, "*Muriel.*"

"What is the question?" she asked in a low voice.
"Why not ask me—the question—now?"

In spite of herself her voice was trembling. Here at her hand was wealth, and the power of wealth, and beyond that the shining road of promise of political power. So many things might happen

before he came to-night. This was the place and the hour. It might not come again. Had not an old man's unexpected marriage showed her that one never knew what the day might bring forth?

She turned her face, a questioning, innocent face, that seemed to find only an idle meaning in his words. Her face gripped suddenly the heart of Julian Wright as that of no other woman had done ever in the past, as he believed no other woman's would again.

Words tumbled from his lips, rushed forth.

In the room behind, Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright, talking to Lady Anne, had laughed self-consciously as the two figures passed out on to the balcony.

"Sir Julian has been payin' her a great deal of attention," she declared indulgently. "He is really the best catch of the season, dear Lady Anne, you know. Enormously wealthy, magnificent house in Park Lane, and just a few miles from London a place that—"

"And what about Lionel Warde?" interrupted Lady Anne bluntly. "Wasn't she engaged to him?"

"Oh, in a way, I suppose so. But it was really impossible after that marriage"—her voice dropped—"and of course you have heard the latest rumours, Lady Anne? Just think of it. It would never, never have done. Dear Muriel is not fitted for poverty. Why, they say the Boy had little more than enough to pay his passage to the Colonies. It would never, never do, you see—"

Lady Anne looked down the long room toward the

closed door that led on to the terrace. Her blinking glance travelled slowly and thoughtfully back as if she were bidding a silent farewell to all she saw about her, including Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright.

"Yes—I think I see," said Lady Anne, "I think I see."

CHAPTER II.

SLOWLY, against the leaping flame of the sunset, the pearl-luggers were beating out to sea.

From the lift of the land behind, with its changing glory of colour, the blue of the jacaranda-trees, the tall fronded palms, and the vivid red of the croton bushes, the skeleton line of the pier at Nyasha ran down the white beaches and cut sharply into the shimmering blue.

In the clustering ti-trees that huddled close to the white sanded beach the wind was making a thick muttering sound like that of a man in his sleep.

Above was the immensity of sky, below the immensity of sea, and on the island of Nyasha the curving sweep of grey-green land, streaming back from the white seashore to a huddling line of hills on a far horizon ; and beyond again to the blue dimness of the great mainland of Australia.

The light poured down in a crimson flood, from the overturned urn of the sunset, on the white sloop-sails of the fishing fleet bearing out to sea, on Nyasha Island, on the primitive town crouching amid the

rugged ti-trees of Nyasha Bay, on the grey-green land with its gaunt gums, the leaves scarce stirring in the wind, and on the white boles outlined starkly and eerily against the dark broken line of hills.

In an hour or so, for night falls early in the Land of the Southern Cross, the black crouching shadows in the fastnesses of the mountains would slink forth, squat heavily on the long, lonely plains, and blur with the swift passing of a giant's hand the collection of native huts and galvanised iron residences that formed the town of Nyasha.

Blackham, the pearl-trader, swinging on his way down the thin, skeleton-legged pier, turned on his heel and swore vilely as the Javanese diver behind him tripped over a weighty shell-basket and came down heavily among the loose litter of iron and ropes.

He swore still more vilely when he discovered that the Javanese had broken a leg, and pointed despairingly at the master schooner lying at the pier. He began a volley of futile questions and upbraiding.

"Whom can I get to take your place?" Blackham was asking furiously of the unconscious native and the world in general; "pig, idiot, whom can I get—"

"Ask the Englishman," said Talumeni, and laughed, showing her little white teeth; "ask the mad Englishman who comes to make money and find wonderful pearls, and in the meantime loses what money he has."

She had come from one of the more pretentious huts, almost houses, that faced the pier. There was mockery and a world of meaning in her voice. "Why not ask the Englishman?" she repeated.

She laughed again maliciously as Blackham scowled. He looked back at her standing there on the white-sanded shore by the landing-stage, her black hair streaming out in the wind, a scarlet hibiscus flower nodding mockingly behind her brown ears. True daughter was she of the island of the tall palms and banyan-trees, of the glowing croton bushes and wealth of scarlet-tasselled blossoms that flamed behind her.

Blackham said something loudly and expressively in Javanese. With a shrug of indifference, his daughter turned and began to make her way nonchalantly along the beach towards the township. Talumeni took from her father only his daring ; her philosophy was a heritage from a native mother.

The sun to the last burned fiercely on the white-sanded sea-path and on the galvanised iron roofs of the houses and shops of Nyasha. Beyond them, on a barren, desert-like stretch of land, still rose a faint wavering shimmer of heat. In the square formed by a natural plantation of tall red gums and scrubby ti-trees, on the road that wound by the sea down to the township, two men sat in the pointed shadow of a tent. They sat on a felled log, facing the township, watching in momentary silence what life and movement there was in the one straggling main street below.

In Nyasha at this hour all the white inhabitants, it seemed, were making for one point. A little while ago a cloud of dust had arisen suddenly on the winding road ; and with the cracking of whips and the jingling of harness, the weekly coach had made its appearance, and the driver had gone through his

usual hurried procedure, thrown the reins loosely over the sweating horses, flung the mail-bags down on the unboarded post-office verandah, and vanished into a conveniently handy hotel.

Most of the male section of Nyasha followed. The coach driver was the human newspaper of their district, the one link between them and the mainland. To the pear-shaped neck of Nyasha Island, over the narrow straits that separated the island from Australia, through the hundreds of miles he came cheerily winter or summer, changing horses en route, gathering and disseminating his news, sometimes bringing a stray passenger to try his luck at the pearl fisheries.

In the shadow of the tent under the red gums and the blue jacaranda-trees the two men watched the slow procession. The younger man, at least, had used this method of travel to reach Nyasha. Perhaps, as he stared down the road, he was thinking of it now.

His lean, gaunt face, pale as if from recent illness, was moody.

"I suppose it will be more than an hour before the mail is sorted," he said. "They seem to take a long while at Dunkley's Stores to sort out a small mail, Mac."

"There's only Jane to do it," replied McDougall. He raised himself on his elbow a moment to peer down the hollow where his waggon and the team of bullocks were resting.

The younger man's eyes moved from idle contemplation of the street to the line of Dunkley's Stores. He stared there as if he would see right into the narrow lean-to that formed the post-office. Some-

thing wistful came into his eyes. "Three weeks," he said to himself, "since there has been a mail."

"Ay, there's only Jane of Dunkley's to do it," repeated McDougall. He fumbled in his pocket and took out his pipe, ready for a few minutes of gossip about the town and the doings of its inhabitants. "An' Jane's a good girl. When ye're here a little longer, ye will ken that with no telling. The second Mrs. Dunkley now, she can't stand the heat, nor the folk at Nyasha Bay, an' neither can the second Mrs. Dunkley's children since they went to college. Only Jane and the old man can stand the heat," he added sarcastically.

The younger man nodded absently. He leaned back on his log and watched the dusky street ahead, and the last rays of the sun beating hotly down on the roof of the post-office.

The old grizzled bullocky, who at times brought goods from as far south as Perth, droned on with his gossip. Sandy McDougall often rested for a week or more at Nyasha, and made his abiding-place in the hollow at the foot of this rise. He had climbed up there one evening, with a desire for company, and found the young Englishman who had recently come to Nyasha, lying delirious in the throes of inland-fever. With dog-like faithfulness McDougall had nursed the stranger through all those following weeks of illness.

The gossip of the town, or indeed of the whole stretch from the Interior to Cape Leeuwin, had no interest for Lionel Warde. Only one thing mattered. "Only one thing mattered," he repeated feverishly to himself.

He turned his eyes away from the group of men who began to cluster in front of the post-office, and, at the thought, looked away at the blue, swaying waters of the sea.

Over the waters, far away, was England, and in England nearly a year ago he had said that in a year he would come back, and he would not come empty-handed.

How she, that slim girl of his heart, and he, had talked of the days to be ! He was to go out into the Interior, that wonderful North-West country of Western Australia, and there among the pearl-fisheries make his fortune.

"Don't be longer than a year," she had said, smiling up at him. "You can find a pearl in a day sometimes, they say."

Oh, dreams and reality were two different things ! He had not thought then of fevers that swept away one's strength, of landing in a strange country, penniless, because the hands of others had dipped deep into one's pockets, of the struggle and privations on that Road to Fortune. When she and he had talked of that road, always the sun shone on it.

He had fought doggedly. Week by week, her following letters, brief though they were, helped him on. For over five weeks now, just before this bout of inland-fever laid him low, there had been no letter. But there surely would be a letter to-day !

Somewhere along the white-sanded beach behind him some one was singing a plaintive song, a song of hibiscus flowers, those strange, weirdly beautiful flowers of crimson, long tasselled, shaped like Madonna lilies. The song drifted towards him,

a melody strange and unknown to him, yet haunting and troubling him with many memories.

"Talumeni!" exclaimed McDougall; and then, "how she grows!"

Talumeni, daughter of Pedro Blackham, the wealthiest of the pearl-traders of Nyasha Bay, went lightly by. She was bareheaded, and the scarlet hibiscus flower nodded in her black hair. The sun beat down on the slim, swarthy beauty of her and her undeniable grace. Her little dark feet in their amber-coloured sandals, made scarcely any sound as she went. The long, tunic-shaped, clinging white garment she wore was the despair of a well-meaning Nyasha missionary's wife, who believed that morality and a blouse and skirt were inseparable. But Talumeni wore daringly just what she would. Paris could dare no more than the thin silk with the huge mother-o'-pearl buckle, and the slendang slung over one shoulder.

She flashed a glance at the two men, at the bullocky with his blue dungaree shirt and moleskin trousers, at the younger man with his pale face and the blue eyes that looked at her in curiosity and admiration.

It was not the first time that Talumeni had seen the Englishman, but apparently it was the first time he had seen her.

"And yet I have taken this road often," said Talumeni. Her lips pouted and she looked back over her shoulder.

The young Englishman was looking after her, smiling vaguely at the proud lift of the little dark head with its fragrant burden of scarlet blossom.

But he was thinking of some one else than Talumeni Blackham.

The half-caste girl smiled too as she went, flashing a provocative look back from her dark eyes. A warm colour came into her face and set her pulses thrilling strangely.

The Englishman was saying, "These half-castes are very conceited, aren't they?"

"Oh, aye," said McDougall. "They just are."

"Who is she—the girl who just went by?"

"She's daughter of Pedro Blackham, the pearl-trader. Aye, but he has the wee bit money."

"But he's a white man, isn't he, Sandy?"

"Oh, there's a black strain somewhere in him," said McDougall carelessly. "He married a Javanese, and she died some years ago." He peered after Talumeni in surly fashion. "She walks well, like all the Javanese women, but she's got a look of old Blackham about her eyes, and that's going to bode ill for some man," he added emphatically.

"It's rather sad, I think," said Warde. "What future has that girl got before her?" and then, "Some day of course she'll marry."

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe and filled it slowly.

"It would be better if she didna," argued MacDougall. "The lassie maybe is all right, but there's the black blood in her, and the instincts of the savage. Some day it will come out, an' it will come out in Blackham too. He is a bad de'il at best."

"He is a lucky pearler." In the light of the match that he held to his pipe young Warde's face was pale, its hollows intensified. He laughed bitterly.

"I wonder, if I offered to work for him, would any of the luck come to me?"

"Ye're no fit yet to talk about work," McDougall answered dryly. "An' there's no white man will work for Pedro Blackham. What's the hurry, mon?"

Warde looked away at the sea for a moment. His profile was boyish, a little sad and bitter.

"There's some one——" he began uncertainly; and then with a rush of words, "It's nearly a year since I've left England, and I've done nothing, nothing at all. I've lost nearly every penny that I had, I've only the lugger left, and a poor thing at that, McDougall. A year, a whole year and nothing for it, save loss and fever and disappointment after disappointment——"

Old Sandy McDougall, watching him keenly under his furrowed brows, nodded in understanding. He too had been young. He too had had his dreams of fortune-making. He looked down at his bullocks, and nodded again.

"But a year's a wee while, anyway," he said, "a wee while. Ye can no be nothing much in a twelve-month."

"But—I promised some one that in a year I would come back. I promised her——" He paused and bit his lip, flushing. It seemed all at once to him a strange thing that he, youngest son of an old if impoverished family, should be sitting there, on a day late in January and in a strange country, talking of things far away, and opening his heart to a bullock-driver.

"Ay, there's always a wee lassie in it," said

McDougall thoughtfully. He rose, looking towards the fading sunset from which the flame and fire had long since vanished.

"But there's nae lassie worth fashing over unless she can do a wee bit of waiting." There was something in his voice that brought to the younger man a deep sense of compunction.

The sun sank suddenly in the west, over the swaying glory of the Indian Ocean, but a faint glow, like the heart of a rose, yet lingered. Warde wondered why his old friend stared so fixedly over the waters and watched the fading reflections of the sunset. He wondered what it brought to the old bullocky, what thoughts, what memories? As he looked at that strong, rugged face he felt some shame at the despair that had crept over him, at the thought that he had ever expected so much in such a short while. Life and anything worth while in life had to be fought for. One had to climb, step by step. Only in books one flung out a hand and grasped wonders. In life itself there was a road, a road to be climbed and many things to be learned. The lines on McDougall's face told that he had walked that road of life and had learned many lessons.

"You—waited, McDougall?" he said.

"Aye, I waited." He passed a grizzled hand across his brow. The smile played a little tremulously about his lips. "I waited, but she died." He stared hard at the swaying sea for a moment.

"She was a mill-hand," he added. "She worked in a mill. I doubt your lassie will be a mill-hand, but women are all alike whatever they do. If a lassie is

true she will wait, if it's twenty years. Otherwise, she is no' worth the waiting for."

" My lassie died," he said again. He said it simply. He passed his grizzled hand over his face again and pulled down over his wrinkled forehead the weather-stained straw-hat with its green band and dangling row of corks. " But, I'd rather she died than be unfaithful. Wi' a dead love you can have memories, many hours together that no one knows of but yourself. Wi' an unfaithful woman there's nae memories save those that drive ye to the drink-shop and the de'il."

" My lass is very faithful and true," said Warde in a low voice. He smiled as he said the word, for little the word seemed to fit his tall, slim fiancee with her regal head and her imperious ways. But the word was sweet and came near to a man's heart. In some subtle way it seemed to bring her nearer. Yes, his lass would wait and nothing should part them. Had she not so promised ?

The old man smiled wistfully.

" When ye next write maybe ye will be telling her that fortune is a Will-o-the-Wisp, and not yet in your land. Tell her a year is a wee while after all, though it seems long in the making—and now I will be away to the post-office. Don't ye be stirring any way. I'll come back to tea, and set the camp fire alight and make ye tea."

He turned abruptly and took the road that led to Nyasha. On the way he paused to look down into the hollow where his own camp rested, to speak to the placid bullocks, and they ceased chewing the cud and looked up at him, as if they understood ; perhaps

they did. The bush breeds a comradeship and sense of understanding between men and dumb creatures.

Back on the rise, amid the clustering trees and the tall, silent gums, the young Englishman stared before him at the darkening stretch of the land, the tussocked desert and the rugged chain of mountains. He lay there on the short grass and smoked and dreamed many dreams, of happiness, and, ever-recurring, a woman's face. And so he forgot for a while that the desert lay before him, stripped almost bare like his life.

Far away, somewhere on the shadows of the sea, the melancholy sweetness of a native song drifted, haunting, elusive, full of a wistful sadness. Only faintly he heard it now. In those days it had little meaning for Lionel Warde.

CHAPTER III.

JANE of Dunkley's was sorting the mail.

The January sun was blazing hotly down on the galvanised iron roof of the lean-to in the primitive bush post-office attached to Dunkley's Stores.

The roof sloped abruptly to the row of rakish shelves, with their roughly framed and uneven receptacles for letters. The alphabetical guide was written in long-faded ink, but Jane of Dunkley's, with years of familiarity, could have found each compartment even if she were blindfolded.

Outside, under the corrugated iron verandah, men lounged and spat on the ground and talked of the weather or the pearling returns, until the closed door of the post-office should open as a sign that the letter sorting was finished.

In the meantime Jane limped back and forwards from the dusty counter to the shelves, threading her way between rows of stale cabbages, bags of potatoes and kerosene boxes, the overflow from the adjacent storeroom.

The little crowd outside grew, as was usual on mail-days in Nyasha. Men rode, or drove, or walked up to the post-office, and gathering under the shelter of the sloping verandah leaned against the posts, or squatted on the packing boxes or the bags of potatoes. Now and again their voices drifted inside ; occasionally, with a faint thud, a belated comer threw a letter into the oblong opening marked with the faded legend "Letters" and "Newspapers."

Half a mile away, swayed lazily the blue of the Indian Ocean, foaming gently towards the long stretch of the white beaches, and far away, when one looked towards the mainland from Cygnet Bay to Broome, there was an almost uninterrupted view of the white line of the curving beach.

The tide was low and a coral reef showed brightly pink in the sun, flashing with wet purple and brown seaweed. A long slender line of silt and creamy sand rose in the foreground. Beyond, the sails of the fishing-luggers and scows gleamed against the pearl-grey swath of the horizon. White specks circled and flew low against the nearer, vivid blue of sky and sea, and the clamorous call of the seagulls floated in with the sluggish wind.

Inside the lean-to, Jane Dunkley sighed with relief as she broke the seal of the last bag and untied the canvas. The few letters sprawled on the counter, British mail most of them. Her busy hands paused over one letter and she studied it thoughtfully. Jane lifted her grey eyes for a moment, and looked out at the group on the verandah outside. She went to the window and peered through the intervening screen of

torn mosquito netting and red dust, and then along the road towards the sea where the red gums clustered in the ridge, and a white tent showed amongst the greenness.

Only a swagman, old and bent, was on the road now. He trudged along, a familiar-enough sight in Australia, his blueyswung over his stooping shoulders, a tin billy, black with the smoke of many fires, in his hand, and behind him the inevitable mongrel, slinking along in the yellow dust.

"I'm glad there's a letter at last, anyway," said Jane to herself. She placed the letter in the fourth compartment from the end.

"I'm glad," said Jane again, as she went back to the counter, and gathered up the remaining letters. "It's the first letter for nearly two months." She smiled whimsically. "I just felt I would have to write a letter myself if one hadn't come."

She flung wide the door a moment later, and the crowd streamed in, laughing and joking, taking up all the available limited space, and filling the air with rough, good-natured raillery.

Jane took it all good-humouredly, handing out the letters with many a teasing comment and the witticisms for which she was famed.

"Faith, it's a letter from the Duke of Blucher, Denis," she laughed as she handed over a bill from the local bootmaker to a freckled, sandy-haired Irish giant from the backblocks. "Shure, an' I'm after thinking that maybe 'tis an invitation for a presentation at Court, the County Court of course, an' the royalty of Nyasha present in full force, full of sentiment and beer."

The crowd laughed and the giant grinned sheepishly and good-naturedly. One and all they enjoyed the cheery running fire of comment, and Jane's frankness.

Jane, in her shabby clean print frocks and her wide cheerful smile, was part and parcel of the life at Nyasha, and her raillery part of the bi-weekly mail-day, just as Jane was part of Dunkley's Stores. Even McDougall, the canny Scot, a sturdy champion, on certain occasions, of Bobby Burns and all his works, and a reciter thereof at every opportunity, smiled at Jane.

"Hooch aye, nae letter the day, Mac," she would announce. "But there's a wireless frae the Glasgow Haggis Club. An' they would be liking ye tae call that famous pearl of yours after Bobby Burns—when ye find it."

Summer, Autumn, Winter or Spring, Jane was always cheerful, and always to be found in her place behind old Dunkley's counter, a little pale and thinner perhaps in the intense heat of summer, but always Jane.

Silas, or old "Silent Dunkley" as he was familiarly known, had several other daughters and a son or two. They were all away at college somewhere on the other side of the mainland, cultivating a well-bred, steadily-growing hatred of Nyasha Bay and its heathen ways. Only Jane, who the family had decided long ago was more useful than ornamental, stayed on. The second Mrs. Dunkley, who spent most of her life away from Nyasha, had proclaimed fretfully and on more than one occasion that Jane could never be a lady; it would be much better for

her therefore to content herself at Nyasha. The second Mrs. Dunkley had a deeply-rooted belief that no one with red hair could be a lady. No one challenged her views on the subject.

"Jane had store-tastes," she used to say with a little shudder, and then with a sigh, "Jane was very like her mother."

For the first Mrs. Dunkley had not been, as the second holder of that name, a delicately nurtured governess on a country station; the first Mrs. Dunkley had been unladylike enough to serve behind the counter, in the days when Dunkley's Stores was not spelt in the plural, and when the counter itself was composed solely of kerosene boxes.

The first Mrs. Dunkley had helped to build up the business, and shouldered the responsibilities manfully, looking forward to a possible future of comfort, and just before that time came, she had faded quite suddenly out of life at the end of a trying summer.

So Jane and the old man, with the help of a few youths in the grocery and drapery and ironmongery departments, ran the Stores between them, and supplied the sixteen hundred or more inhabitants of Nyasha with the necessities of life, and such correspondence as filtered through to this half-forgotten island off the western mainland.

Jane Dunkley was not pretty like her half-sisters, and knew well that, in the parlance of Brimhaven, she was not in the same street for looks. Tall and slim was Jane, graceful enough in her careless way, tanned and plain of face, save for her grey eyes. She wore her hair brushed straight back from her face,

coiled in one soft auburn knot, low on her neck ; and she limped slightly, the result of an accident in her schooldays. No one with a limp, Jane decided, after a perusal of such fiction as the Stores afforded, could ever be a heroine.

Jane's mouth was wide and laughing, and her eyes had a habit of crinkling up rather alluringly at the corners. At twenty-two, she had no illusions about herself. She acknowledged to herself, quite frankly, that she was the Cinderella of the family, with the disadvantage that her face was too plain to fit in the story, and her feet too large to fit the glass slipper. She came to these conclusions after many soul-tearing peeps in the broken mirror in her bedroom.

They sold piles of sixpenny novels at Dunkley's Stores. The few that Jane, in her spare time, had read, had given her a growing belief that love was a fictitious emotion people wrote about in order to sell books ; anyhow, good cooking was more essential than love in Nyasha, so Jane dismissed the subject altogether.

Nyasha was a fairly new find of the pearl-fisheries. Many miles up from Broome, Nyasha Island flung itself off from Australia, and Nyasha Town perched itself on a tiny headland, a jumble of tents and galvanised iron-roofed houses, native huts, and giant trees and ragged palms.

From the window of the post-office at Dunkley's Stores you could see all that was to be seen, the thin black skeleton of the Brimhaven jetty stretching out from the headland, a parent schooner or two rocking lazily in the blue water, the dark shining

bodies of the natives who, chanting a native song of melancholy sweetness, loaded the steamers or bent over the shell baskets on the quay, their loin-cloths thrusting a gay note of colour into the landscape.

A few traders in white suits and wide-brimmed hats gathered together, or made their way across the red-loamed earth down to the headland and the black thin-bodied pier, and the white sweeping curve of the Ninety-Mile Beach.

Jane stood at the door when the crowd had gone, and looked out for a moment. The main road of the township ran by the stores. Near the store a group of red-gums stood, the leaves scarce swaying in the windless day. To the right was the stretch of desert that ran for miles almost to the mountains, the one thing about Nyasha, folk said, that was barren and ugly, but which Jane Dunkley found beautiful.

A Javanese went past in the dusty yellow road, chanting some queer melody as he went. Its monotonous, reedy sweetness lingered in the still air after him.

Jane hummed it softly :

“ Tehani . . . Tehani
Artini . . . Ichani.”

A waggon came slowly and creakingly into sight, the wooden yokes bowing the heads of the bullocks low. They swung creakingly along, heads bent apathetically to the dust, dumb, uncomplaining. The long whips of the driver circled above them unheeded, just occasionally flicking their heavy flanks.

McDougall, the bullocky, walked beside the waggon, the dust curling about him, a picturesque figure in his blue dungaree shirt and moleskin trousers, with a leather band tight at the knees. Under the big rush hat, bordered with green tape, a wet cabbage leaf rested on his head, as protection from the sun. He paused for a moment to speak with Jane Dunkley and then took the road that led out of Nyasha, and across the desert towards the stem of the pear-shaped island. For weeks he would be away from Nyasha.

Along the white-sanded narrow path, bordering the road where the dust of the waggons still lingered, came a slim young figure.

"Talumeni," said Jane, and her wide mouth smiled and her red-brown head nodded a greeting.

Talumeni, smiling, went lightly by, bareheaded as usual and with the scarlet hibiscus flower nodding in her black hair, her bangles tinkling musically as she made her way down towards the black line of the pier, where her father's schooner swung at anchor.

Jane looked after her a little wistfully. With a sigh she turned and went indoors and began to sweep and tidy up the post-office. Nearly all the letter shelves were empty, but at the end a square of white showed in the dusty pigeon-hole.

Down the road the young Englishman who had pitched his tent in the shade of the gum-trees was walking slowly. He gazed about him, noting how the paint had blistered and shrivelled on Dunkley's Stores, with the heat of the passing summer. The tall trees that bordered each side of the straggling street drooped listlessly in the heat.

He came very slowly up to the door of the post-office, hesitating for a moment on the threshold. He had come so often in vain.

The room was empty save for the girl who was busily dusting the interior of the letter shelves. She turned abruptly at the sound of his voice, and the faintest of flushes came into her pale face.

"Any letters?" he asked. He had taken off his wide-brimmed hat and was holding it in his hands. His eyes went eagerly but nervously to the shelves.
"Any letters, Miss Dunkley?"

"Yes—a letter from the old country at last," said Jane, and a smile shone on her face. Her eyes crinkled up at the corners as she brought forward the letter.

"Only one," added Jane blithely. She handed it across the worn counter. "I was afraid that you were not going to call for it to-day. I meant to send it up by one of the men."

"Thank you," he answered gratefully; "it was very good of you."

"Are you better?" asked Jane, leaning forward against the counter with her usual frankness, but without any effort now at her raillery. "I heard some of the men here to-day say that you had been down with a touch of the fever again."

"Yes. Hard luck, wasn't it?" he said. He had a touch of boyishness about him, that sat well on him, a certain air of frankness that appealed to Jane. "But I think I'm all right now, Miss Dunkley."

Jane smiled her wide, amused smile as she always

did when he so addressed her. To every one else in Nyasha she was always Jane.

"And you've bought a pearl-lugger," she began conversationally.

He had made as if to go, still holding the letter unopened as was his way. The others who called at Dunkley's always opened them then and there in the post-office, and often read out loud bits of interest, but Curley Warde, as he had been nicknamed, had always placed the few letters that came into his vest pocket and then made for the path that led by the sea to his hut.

"I suppose you think I'm rather foolish to contemplate the diving," he said awkwardly, and paused, and then in a burst of boyish confidence—one always felt like that with Jane, he added, "but it's a case of not being able to do anything else."

"You've had hard luck." She looked at him thoughtfully. "First you were robbed of your money coming out here, and then you went down with fever just as you were beginning to make a way for yourself. Our climate isn't very kind to Englishmen, I'm afraid."

In spite of her summer pallor she looked very fresh and sweet in her faded print as she leaned against the counter. She had a sympathetic voice, clear and rather pleasing. Her eyes were kind. Their kindness and friendliness reached out to the loneliness in him.

"But I'll make good, yet," he said. His hand tightened over the letter he still held. "I must make good."

Something came then into his voice. Jane nodded,

with her wise understanding smile. Many men had said these things.

" You will have a heap of difficulties, maybe," she said. " They come to everybody. And you're handicapped in a way. But all the same there's many a man, who has had luck in the pearl-fishing. Think of the Broome fisheries and the finds of some magnificent pearls there. Here at Nyasha, is a field that's little explored, and has greater treasures."

She straightened herself, and moved away as a customer came in. " Some day," she added, looking over her shoulder, " I hope you will come and show me a wonderful find of pearls. May it be very soon."

" Thank you," he said simply, and a warm glow came into his heart as he turned away. The faint cloud of depression vanished from his face as he swung down the dusty road, and made for the path by the sea, the path that led under the rustling palms down along the curving beach to his solitary hut.

He thought idly as he went of the quiet beauty of Jane's eyes, of the curious fascination of the wide, friendly smile, and then as he went along he began to whistle. Against his heart was a letter from his love. After all these dreary weeks of sickness and silence she had written, and the weeks were swept away as if they had never been.

Down in the shadow of the ti-trees, with the sea swaying out before him he would read the letter his little love had written. Colour came into his face, and light into his eyes.

He sank down on the white shining sands and looked for one moment across the sea. There, far away, but very near, Muriel waited.

The words of the old Scotchman came back to him as he sat there, the letter still unopened, resting against his heart.

"If a lassie is true she will wait, if it be twenty years."

And his lassie was true, he knew. Then nothing else would matter. He would gladly work his fingers to the bone for her if need be. What had the girl with the grey eyes told him at the store, of men's ill-luck that had changed in a day? His thoughts swung back for a moment to the girl of the grey-eyes and her frank comradely ways.

He took Muriel Cartwright's letter from his pocket, and there in the shadow of the ti-trees pressed it to his lips, then lifted his face to the wind that swept seawards as if he would send by it a message.

Somewhere on the path of the sea, he heard Talumeni, daughter of Pedro Blackham, singing. The singing rose and fell; high and low, blending in with the rhythm of the murmuring sea.

Jane of Dunkley's had come to the door of the post-office and, shading her eyes from the sun with one slim, freckled hand, looked out over Brimhaven.

She could not hear Talumeni singing, for the wind blew seawards, but she could see a flash of fluttering scarlet on the rocks by the swaying sweep of blue water, the thin black line of the pier, the ragged mimosas fluttering in the wind of dust.

Jane in reality saw none of these things. For once, she was not smiling. Her lifted face, pale, a little thin, was rather wistful, her grey eyes dark and a little troubled.

For the first time in her happy, healthy life Jane Dunkley, without reason, felt vaguely unhappy and lonely.

CHAPTER IV.

ALL along the narrow ti-tree path lay torn scraps of paper, white against the steadily deepening dusk. A faint pearl-grey haze, thickening slowly into mist, was creeping over the sea. Over the distant paddy-fields, and the brown desert-like track of country that stretched as far as the eye could see, the dusk turned to purple, and wreathed darkly about the broken mountains of Nyasha.

Along the road, above the sea-path, the natives were returning from work, their tools slung over their brown shoulders, or in baskets. The vivid blues and reds of their sarongs and kabajas softened and blended in the fast fading light. They sang as they went, and the brightly coloured slendangs or sashes that the women wore fluttered in the light cool wind.

On the narrow sea-path, heavily wrestling with shadowy ti-tree, the wind stirred the torn bits of paper, and sent them fluttering over the cliff edges or down to the shining stretch of sand below. The man stumbling along with stooping shoulders and bent

head never heeded. The seagulls screaming harshly, wheeled out from the ocean ways, fluttered whitely and flew in narrow circles toward the cliffs. From the road above drifted the haunting air of melancholy sweetness that the Javanese natives sang.

Perched on the huge boulders, where the path dipped to Nyasha and silhouetted darkly against the greying sea Talumeni, weaving and unweaving the long black braids of her hair, was singing too, waiting as she had often waited lately for the Englishman to pass.

The dusk deepened slowly, and the huddled mountains of Nyasha far away loomed blackly and seemed to creep nearer, when at last he came, taking the path that led by the green-grey cliff.

He came not now with face lifted to the sea, inhaling the cool wind that blew across the narrow strait and brought its gift of fresh life and hope.

Many a night had Talumeni seen him there, against the jutting spur of the rocks, looking out over the sea. To-night she sat perched on the low group of rocks, glancing sideways out of her dark slanting eyes, and pinning carelessly behind her little brown ears fragrant blossoms of hibiscus and heavily-scented frangipani. Her little crooning song that floated softly down the path along which the Englishman came was half petulant, luring, and wholly provocative.

The man never heard it. He never saw Talumeni. He stumbled along under the tousled ragged ti-trees that flung out gaunt catching arms as if to bar his progress. Behind him on the darkening earth the

torn scraps of paper fluttered in the wind. "He walks as one in sleep," muttered Talumeni. Her song ceased. She stared after him with quick, angry tears in her eyes. As he passed from sight around the bend of the cliffs she tore suddenly at the dainty scarlet slendang that she had tied loosely at her waist and flung it from her. She slipped from the rocks and ran into the dark shadow of the ti-trees and flung herself sobbing on the brown earth.

The Englishman went on his way unheeding ; as he stumbled onward he was repeating over and over to himself in a dull, puzzled voice, words that far away some had carelessly written.

"Love and marriage nowadays are two different things—is there really such a thing as love, or is it not but another of the illusions of youth ? And anyhow, it's madness for us to marry when we are both so poor. I might have to wait for years until I am *passée*, and you would have no more than you have now. It was madness for either of us to dream for one moment that fortunes were to be had for seeking. It is quite hopeless. . . ."

And then almost at the end.

"I have had to realise that you will never succeed, Lionel. I don't know whether I ever really believed that you would succeed. You were not made for a struggle with life, and neither am I. I could not do without luxuries—my very soul craves for them. . . . So—our romance must end. You have heard me speak of Sir Julian. My engagement to him was announced in the *Morning Post* last week. I meant to send you just the notice, thinking you would

understand, then I thought that perhaps you would think it was a mistake, so I have written. I must not write to you again, Lionel. I ask you to destroy my letters, and forget me. . . .”

He had come to the end of the pathway. Here the roads diverged : to one side it dropped down to the shining beach, to the right the land stretched away, dark brown, full of crouching shadows in the dim light. Far away through the ragged branches of trees a slim crescent of a wan moon showed.

He crept into the shadow of the rocks and sat there, until the stars flickered overhead, twinkling out of the trailing mist. The thin moon waned and dipped slowly lower. It slipped over the rim of the world and left him there, on the dark rocks above Nyasha, in a world of loneliness and loss and disillusionment.

It was very still. The wind had died down, and the silence was profound. There came not the faintest rustle in the ragged ti-trees. Only, far below, the swaying seas muttered hoarsely against the white-sanded beach.

The hours passed. Down in the little township the lights blazed brightly and steadily. There came very faintly now and again sounds of life and human habitation, the strains of a concertina, the barking of a dog, a calling voice, a group of natives singing. Now and again a laugh echoed.

He sat there, shut out from it all, isolated, his life torn like the scraps of paper of Muriel's letter. He was very young, and life seemed ended ; nothing in it was now worth striving for.

Muriel far away, dainty, lovely and alluring, would perhaps be dancing, laughing, her feet already on the rose-strewn path of Life. He, Lionel Warde, who a few months before had held her in his arms, had listened [to her voice, sat now far away, without a soul who understood, or cared what became of him.

Here he was, broken on the wheel. A dull resentment rose within him, the dogged persistence of his race, but through it all smouldered dully the fires of anguish and pain.

He stood up, a shadow among shadows on that lonely place by the sea.

On the low hill, to which, like a limpet, Nyasha clung, he saw the light flickering, here and there one brighter than the others.

The lights lured him, beckoned him, as he struck down the path and turned towards them ; the strains of the concertina grew in volume ; there was a sound of singing and laughter that accompanied it. Down in Flanigan's pub there was at least laughter, and lights and merriment. He swung down the road, past the native quarter, through the narrow half-street, half-lane where the tiny primitive native markets huddled on one side of the road. In front of them natives clustered and gossiped and bargained for the heaped-up fruits in the bamboo-baskets, or the plantain-leaves with their measure of cooked rice. The flame-trees showed white patches against the darker background ; on the road that dipped abruptly to the sea, he saw in the half darkness the native huts, perched high and quaintly on the slender stilts that were driven into the sea-sand,

and the rude skeleton ladder that served as a stairway.

Here and there on the broad platform of the huts native women grouped and chattered. In the torch lights of one of the markets a woman sat and crooned to her babe. Out of the voluminous folds of the slendang sash she wore, the little black downy head showed. In the dust of the road the children rolled and laughed merrily. The flaring lights of Flanigan's hotel rose suddenly before him. He was just at the end of the native quarter and near where the houses and tin huts of the whites were built. The lights blazed cheerfully forth in a path of light. Laughter floated forth, interspersed with a drunken burst of song.

For a moment he paused. It was all sordid and cheap, but outside was the soft dark and a thousand startling memories.

Inside, was at least a modicum of forgetfulness.

Flanigan came to the door and his little sharp-sighted eyes peered out. He called out a jovial welcome, and Warde went in. Flanigan had the face of a well-fed saint, and the nature of a leech. So it was hours later when Lionel Warde reeled out of Flanigan's pub, and took the road that led to the tent on the pine-ridge above the township.

The tall gums in the almost deserted street showed ghostlike, white and still. At the end of the road Dunkley's Stores loomed suddenly, and towards it in the opposite direction some one came limping slightly. Another moment and Lionel Warde came face to face with Jane Dunkley.

The light in the one oil lamp above the porch was flickering and burning low.

Jane was wearing a thin white cloak over her dress and a little hoodlike hat on her head ; her gown in the half-light was not whiter than her face. She stood and stared at Lionel Warde. As he reeled past she put out her hand involuntarily and he looked and saw her hand upon his sleeve.

"Mr. Warde," she said in a queer, breathless voice, "what is the matter?" There was something that he could not understand in her voice. Pity was there, and a little scorn, but something more than either. The wavering light threw quivering shadows over her face, as she said, "What has gone wrong?"

"Everything," said Warde. He swayed a little as he spoke and clutched at the verandah post near him.

For a little while Jane did not speak. The sound of the concertina still floated out of Flanigan's pub. In the quiet street the tall trees whispered and the fragrance of the yellow-fringed eucalyptus blossom was all around them. Somewhere, in the darkness along the road, there drifted the jarring sound of drunken laughter. Jane dropped her hand suddenly from his sleeve.

A dull sense of shame broke over him as he looked at her face. He swayed against the post and then a sobering moment came. Along the road the drunken voices grew nearer, the unmistakable voice of Pedro Blackham plainly audible. He was calling loudly for Warde. Jane, with her face turned towards them, listened and heard.

She moved quickly across the verandah and opened the door. On the table within, an oil lamp burned low but steadily.

"Come," she said.

He followed her into the corridor, stumbling a little on the threshold, and she closed the door, shutting out the sound of those drunken voices.

In the room beyond she pointed wordlessly to a chair, and he sank into it.

She stood very quietly before him, her face pale and tense, her clear eyes troubled.

"I am sorry," she said with a catch in her voice; and then, "but, Warde, you are very young—and you have been ill. . . . You have never been to Flanigan's pub before. . . . Those men, they are very drunk and are evidently desirous of getting you back to Flanigan's. You are, of course, free to do as you like, but we. . . . my father has a spare room here if you would stay here—until you are better."

The red flush of shame suffused his face. The clear grey eyes of Jane Dunkley seemed to have softened him, to have pulled him momentarily out of the haze that enveloped his senses.

In the sitting-room the lamp was alight. Jane turned it higher and the light fell on the long, low-built room with its old-fashioned and worn furniture.

She threw up the window near him and the cool night air stole in full of the fragrance of eucalyptus and pine and the salt smell of the sea.

"But I could not think of staying, Miss Dunkley." He stumbled to his feet. A sick sense of shame stole over him.

"Please stay," said Jane. She looked at him very gravely, at his flushed face, at the curly hair above his brow. "My father will not mind in the slightest. My brothers' room opens out of this. It is very quiet and cool, and you will be undisturbed until the morning. Will you not stay?"

Warde sat staring in front of him for a moment.

Then he said in a voice suddenly tremulous.

"I will stay. I thank you very, very much. To a stranger—"

A grave smile came over Jane's face and into her eyes.

"In Nyasha the word stranger soon loses its meaning. We have the Australian spirit of freedom and welcome here. Indeed, we are Australians and of Australia, although we are cut off from the mother continent by just a strip of sea. Very naturally we give an Englishman welcome, for the English blood is in us, and we speak always of her as the Motherland. We speak of Ireland and Scotland separately, but England is always just that—the Motherland. So in a measure"—she was taking off the little quaker-like hood of fine straw with its nodding plume—"we are really relations."

She was speaking simply, in her frank, rather boyish way. Warde, it seemed, could not for the moment trust himself to answer. Jane continued :

"So you see I am taking an auntly interest in you"; she smiled; "a maternal interest sounds so old, doesn't it, and a sisterly interest smacks of sentiment, I have neither of these. My interest in you is one of understanding in some measure your loneliness and

therefore the reason that sent you to Flanigan's pub——”

He caught his breath like a man in pain. Suddenly he blurted out :

“ It was not loneliness, or, if it was, loneliness was not the cause but the effect. You remember the letter which came to-day—the letter for which I waited.”

She looked at him quickly and nodded.

“ I was so happy when you gave it to me, there across the little counter. I had been waiting for weeks, lying there in my tent and making excuses for the delay. And none of them were near to the truth.” He put one hand to his forehead and stared down on the floor.

She waited, leaning against the central table. She noticed that in the vases the yellow eucalyptus bloom was drooping. Through the open window came the faint rustling of the trees, a stirring of leaves in the dried grass.

He sat hunched forward staring down at the floor for a moment. Then in a voice grown suddenly hoarse he continued :

“ I went back to my tent with that letter, and all along the road everything seemed changed. Nyasha before had been to me only as a blurred mass of colour, a confused medley of houses and trees and sea. I saw it differently, with a new hope, a new gladness. I felt I could make good and that I would. When I opened the letter ”—he paused and then went on—“ when I opened the letter the world was at an end.”

Jane said nothing. She was still looking at the

dying bloom in the cheap glass vases. She felt a little tired. The day had been long, and when it ended there had come news of sickness in the native huts among the children.

In sickness they always called on Jane, and Jane, with her collection of homœopathic remedies from the store, would do the best among them, until the doctor should come across the narrow strait between Nyasha and Australia. Jane of Dunkley's had been returning when she met Warde.

"And—you went to Flanigan's," she said. She felt the inadequacy of the words, but it seemed all there was to be said.

Warde did not answer immediately. Through the open window the cool friendly wind was blowing about the curls on his brow. He rose and walked to the window, his face lifted to it, half turned to her.

"The letter that came to-day—I think I will tell you about it if you would care to hear. It came from—a girl to whom I was engaged. She has turned me down for another man with more money—that is all."

Jane said nothing in reply. She gave instead what Warde most needed, the sympathy of her silence. She had seated herself in a low chair by the table. She leaned forward a little, her face supported on the palm of her hand, her grey eyes a little troubled, regarding him.

"You will understand perhaps what it means to me." He found himself all at once desirous of making Jane of Dunkley's understand that he would not go

to Flanigan's again. It was a curious feeling, and for the time being without any meaning. "I came out to Australia determined to succeed. I thought one had only to seek, to find a fortune. I had not known the meaning of hard work. I was very sure that I needed fortune, but not sure how to set about it. Over in England, among the lights and the laughter of London, in a cosy club, or among friends who knew how to spend money but not how to earn it, everything seemed feasible. Fortune seemed easy to attain." He hesitated a moment, then resumed.

"It was harder at the last to leave than I thought. The old home"—he straightened his shoulders—"it had eventually to go, if no effort were made. My uncle was a wealthy man, very old. I'm afraid that I, in common with many others of my class, just drifted on, knowing that the troubles were but temporary, and would pass in the future, without any desire to hurry it. Then my uncle married. He was an old, old man, and he married a very young girl, a chorus girl."

He stopped for a while.

There was suffering now on the proud young face, a line of pain about his lips. Jane felt instinctively, little as she knew of old English families and their pride of race, that the boy before her was not feeling the loss of the money or the fact that he was adrift on his own resources, so keenly as other things that to him mattered most, because they struck at the very roots of old traditions and beliefs.

In those fevered weeks and months of struggle,

when he made his way up from the south-east coast of Australia through the hundreds of miles to Broome, and from Broome onwards in a cattle-boat to far Nyasha — life in that time had taught him many things, had brought him understanding.

Jane imagined him on the other side of the world, one of a type she had often read about. The six-penny novels may have been exaggerated—they no doubt were—but Jane, making allowance for the exaggeration and looking at the man as he now was, came near to the truth.

She imagined him carelessly taking the easy road of life, born and bred in a far different atmosphere from Nyasha, with an Englishman's inalienable love and pride of home and family. She imagined the breaking-in process, the breaking-in to the harder conditions of life, life in its primitive stage, in its bedrock facts, in its fight to wrest from the land and the sea means to make civilisation possible. She imagined those weeks on the long journey from Fremantle—then on a cattle-boat to Broome. Then by boat again, or by the slower medium of the mail-coach, to Nyasha.

“There was some one who promised to wait.”

He neither mentioned a name, nor said one word that might describe her, but Jane saw her clearly. She would be beautiful, of the rose-leaf unfreckled English skin, of dainty ways. She would never have had to serve behind the counter of a post-office, or delve in the dusty recesses of a potato bag, or sell canned goods in a stuffy grocery shop. She would wear wonderful silk evening gowns, and strange

gleaming fabrics that were never seen within a thousand miles of Nyasha.

"There was some one who promised to wait," he was saying. "There were hardships on the way. I do not think I shall ever forget the journey to Broome. The clouds of red dust and the heat that rose in quivering sheets from the sunburnt grass, the fever and the long nights and days. The gaunt, stricken gums everywhere. But I fought through it all—for this."

He flung out his hands in a gesture, palm outwards, signifying not only their emptiness, but the very emptiness of life itself. It was Jane who broke the silence.

"But you will begin again." Her voice held belief. "You will go on."

He left his place by the window and walked up and down before he answered. He seemed to forget her presence.

"Yes, I will go on," he said, "because I must. There is no going back as things are." A thrill of anger broke into his voice. "And I feel now that I never want to go back. They will never hear from me again, any one of them. I will go on here because I must. I am not coward enough to do that which seems to me at present the one thing most desirable, the one thing that would end everything."

Jane did not move. She was leaning forward, her face turned from him. He could only see the pale line of her face, the wavy sweep of her thick hair coiled low on her neck. She spoke at last, in a very low and gentle voice :

" You will stay on here at Nyasha ? "

" Yes."

" You are determined to take up the pearl-fishing, instead of land ? "

" Yes," and then, " have you no faith, then, in the Nyasha fisheries ? "

Jane shook her head, and leaned forward with her elbows on her knees. Her grey eyes regarded him thoughtfully. " It is not that," she said, " but a man must have means to begin with. You may work for years and find nothing apart from the shell-sale, of real value ; not enough, that is, to bring you the amount of money you would require."

" I will give two years to Nyasha," he said. On the mantelshelf the clock chimed the hour of twelve. There was a sound of steps on the gravel, a cheery greeting, and then an outer door opening.

" It is my father," said Jane quickly. He came along the corridor and seeing the light burning, came into the room.

He was an old man, stooping, grey-haired and short-sighted. He peered across the room at Lionel Warde. Jane introduced them as calmly as if it were twelve in the morning instead of at night. The old man nodded.

" Mr. Warde is staying to-night, father," said Jane simply. She rose. The old man nodded in answer. He left everything to Jane and questioned none of her actions. Jane, at many times, had seen fit to offer a bed to strangers. Jane had a hospitable heart. Jane gave hospitality to animals as well as

human beings. All stray cats or dogs, or homeless or hurt dumb creatures somehow found their way to the house attached to Dunkley's Stores and found sanctuary there.

Jane had gone into the kitchen. The old man, silently offering a cigarette to Warde, was smoking. He passed one or two remarks about the weather. He asked no questions. A little later Jane came in with a tray. She had made a refreshing cup of tea. The steam rose cheerfully from the homely china pot with its cracked lid, and Warde drank it gratefully. He wondered whimsically at the Australian idea of having tea at all odd times.

In the room beyond he caught a glimpse of Jane. She was busily folding back the top sheet in a narrow bed and making the room ready for occupation. A candle in a tall stand on a table near, gave forth a steady flame. The bent head with its wavy hair shone red in its glow. She opened the door for him. A little later, with a pleasant good-night, she and her father went out into the wide passage. The one servant had long since gone to bed. Jane lit the couple of candles and blew out the lamp on the hall-table.

The light of the two candles flared up steadily. From his room through the open doorway leading into the passage Warde could see both faces—that of the old man, worn a little grim but kind, and Jane's face, soft and young in the mellow light. Then they moved out of his vision and the light faded.

He stood in the centre of the room and looked

around him. The bedroom had a wall-paper white and clean, strewn with many roses, of an apparently unknown variety. Everything was spotlessly clean and neat, under his feet the yellow matting was cool and quaintly patterned. A rush-chair between the window and the table completed the simple furnishings.

The window was wide open, the white curtains fluttering softly in the wind from the sea. Overhead the sky was cloudless and starry, and the trees in the garden scarcely stirred in the languor of the summer night. The sound of the sea drifted in. It was the last soothing sound in his ears as he lay between the cool linen sheets and drifted into sleep.

Jane of Dunkley's heard the sea also, as she quickly went the usual round of the house to see that there was no danger of fire. She passed along the passage and saw that no light showed beneath the door. Warde, then, was asleep. Jane stood at the kitchen door before closing it and looked out at the dark waste of the desert stretching away on one side, and at the faint pearly shimmer of the sea, lapping gently on the sandy beach.

Her last lingering glance was towards the native villages. No lights flickered there at this hour. She thought dreamily of the sick children, of the doctor's coming on the morrow, of the epidemic of low-fever that each year swept the native villages.

"Poor soul," whispered Jane. Something maternal and deep stirred in her breast. She was

looking still towards the native villages, to the huts on their huge stilts.

She had been thinking of Nyasha the moment before.

"Poor soul," Jane said again. She was not thinking of Nyasha then.

CHAPTER V.

EARLY one morning, a few days later, a man seated in front of his tent on the pine-slope, lifted his eyes from the loose collection of silver and coppers in his leather pouch, and looked thoughtfully down at the black skeleton pier where the parent-schooners were loading.

To the left of him the flat brown desert of shifting sand and wiry tussocks stretched away, broken here and there by piles of broken stone. For over ninety miles the desert stretched down to that narrow, pear-shaped neck of the island, that desolate point of land that was nearest to the vast continent.

Although it was not yet six, of a January morning, the sun blazed down with intolerable heat ; and the wind, blowing vigorously and charged with heat, was turning the flat face of the desert into low spirals of sand. Across the desert very far away, and as yet almost indistinct, a slow-moving line of camels showed black moving dots against the skyline.

Sometimes goods came through the continent and across the narrow strip of sea, and over the sand

dunes of the pathless desert. Transport, though slower that way, was cheaper. Pedro Blackham often sent his pearl-shell this way. Warde turned his face from the desert and looked down at his scanty collection of coins, then his eyes went to the long thin pier where the schooners were loading.

He had come to the end of the road, he told himself bitterly. Over on the narrow beach, his lugger lay seriously broken and battered, maybe by the sudden storms that fall with little warning, maybe not.

A horseman cantered past, calling a cheery greeting, taking the road to the township.

Memory brought Warde back suddenly and incongruously to the Row in Hyde Park, to the green trees bending over the path, a yellow path that ran across the greensward.

The dogged look, familiar of late, came to him. He set his shoulders.

London, and all that London meant, was behind him. The roads of the future stretched before him, branching at his feet ; on the hot January morning he saw them very clearly, saw too that he must put his shoulder to the wheel, and shrink from no honest task.

His eyes went to the pier and lingered there. Then he sprang to his feet. If a thing was to be done, it might as well be done at once ; if he were fated to tread the road of the worker he must set his feet to the trail at once.

Not for one moment did he think of leaving Nyasha and making southward, although yesterday news had filtered through from Broome of a fabulous

pearl-find there. Many a time in the days afterward he wondered why that rumour had not lured him, as many others, southward.

He swung down the narrow path to the beach and thence to the pier where Pedro Blackham the pearl-trader stormed and swore vilely at his men, and cursed the storm of yesterday that had lost him several luggers and valuable divers.

And down the beach towards him, Lionel Warde, bearer of one of the oldest names in England, went, on a quest for work that many a native scorned.

He was Curley now, resident of Nyasha, his surname forgotten or unknown—a man who on moonlight nights in the past had sailed out of an English bay with his yacht rocking to the slow swell, the band playing on deck and smartly dressed women and men in evening clothes leaning against the rail under the dancing silken lanterns. The yacht had touched at many ports : at the sunny, picturesque harbours of Spain and Portugal, along the blue waters of the Mediterranean to old Genoa and the beauty of the Bay of Naples, anchoring in a sheltered sweep of the land, while in the distance the grim cone of Vesuvius loomed against the sky.

Perhaps a thought of those golden days and starry nights came to him, a thought of the sea and the salt wind, of the illuminated deck with its gay lanterns, of the foaming furrows cut in the smooth water and the lights of the seaside villages growing smaller, merging into one, blinking and suddenly disappearing.

His set face, a little pale with the seal of recent illness, showed no reflection of these things as he

passed on to the rough loose boards of the pier at Nyasha.

Pedro Blackham was shrilly filling the world about with the oft-repeated chorus of his complainings ; he poured them forth to all and sundry, to the few white men idly strolling along the pier, to the black ant-like line of natives pattering up the narrow gangway, from wharf to deck.

He included Warde in his enforced audience, and for once Warde listened.

" My best divers, three of them gone, and a lugger sunk with them, loaded with valuable shell. And can't get one man even to take their places for love nor money."

One of the white men passing by smiled significantly at that. It appealed to his sense of humour apparently.

" I can't get a man from Broome for days, and who knows what the weather will be like then . . ."

When the stream of complainings and invective ceased his listener said quietly :

" Would I be of any use ? "

Blackham turned and stared at Warde and gave a short laugh.

The blood flamed into the younger man's face, but he repeated the question

" You ! " Blackham said again, and then more slowly : " What can you do ? You have never done diving or shell-opening even, except in a fool-of-a-way in that lugger of yours——"

" I am willing to learn," Warde answered steadily.

Blackham frowned and looked at him, then his little, small black eyes lit up. He shrugged his

shoulders as if it were the most usual question in the world.

"It won't be easy work," he volunteered.

"I'll chance it," said the younger man quietly. "I might begin by getting into a diver's suit and investigating the lugger for you."

Blackham turned away. "Come on then," he said. He raised his boot to a nigger who happened to be in his way, and the black, with long practice and familiarity with his master's habits, eluded it with ease. "I'll give you the usual wage and a share of the shell"—with one foot on the deck, the other on the gangway, Blackham turned to the man following him, "and something extra if you get anything out of the sunken lugger."

Warde acquiesced. He followed the trader on board the schooner. On the pier below, the two or three white men had gathered together. One was shrugging his shoulders cynically when Warde looked. McDougall's words of warning in relation to Blackham came back to Warde; then he brushed them aside. He would not be working for Pedro Blackham for ever. Long enough, maybe, to save sufficient to buy a lugger and employ the services of four natives to man it.

That would not be this season. For this season, if all went well, he must work hard and late for the half-caste trader. By the time the pearl-luggers were dismantled and laid up until the next season he must have saved enough not only for the lugger of his dreams but for subsistence in the interval.

The work was hard at any time for any trader. For Pedro Blackham work was work indeed. Yet

young Warde squared his shoulders and set his face to his task. He resolved doggedly that, whatever came or went, apart from disablement or an accident, he must "stick to it." And stick to it he did. Through all the days of the season, his dogged persistence pulled him through, in spite of the attendant difficulties.

After the first week or two Blackham ceased searching Broome for a diver in Warde's place.

For a fortnight Jane Dunkley saw nothing of the Englishman. The door of the tent on the secluded pine slope no longer yawned darkly. It was folded across and roped, and no longer in front of it did the blue smoke curl or the camp-fire glow red at night.

The heat grew. The sky was cloudless, of a vivid staring blue, and the sun poured down on the desert until its glare was as quivering brass. The leaves of the trees that lined the street wilted in the heat, but it was ideal weather for pearl-fishing.

Men came into the tiny post-office or gathered in what shade the sloping verandah and clumps of eucalyptus-trees afforded. At one end the wistaria had broken into bloom; great purple fingers hung over and dipped into the tiny spouting beneath.

They talked idly of many things, under that verandah towards the end of the day, or when they clustered about the counter where Jane served cooling drinks at so many coppers per glass. Now and again she heard Warde's name mentioned carelessly. A strange thrill came to Jane's heart as she heard of his dogged persistence, his determination to "make good."

Apparently he was fighting against great odds.

That he was fighting at all was an idle wonder to the men. Pedro Blackham in their eyes was a nigger-driver. They minced no words, even in front of Jane, when they spoke of Blackham.

For five days now, through all the hot but peerless days of blue and gold, Jane had heard no word of Lionel Warde.

She found her thoughts drifting unconsciously and often in the wake of Blackham's schooner, and to the clear sunlit shallow waters where the fleet anchored. She told herself quite gravely that every one in Nyasha interested her. She wondered if he were keeping well, if tan had darkened the paleness of his face, if Pedro Blackham fed him better than he usually did his divers.

One day along the dusty road the familiar wan and white bullocks of McDougall made their appearance and came to a stop in front of the post-office. The old, grizzled Scotchman came in and shook hands with Jane, and asked for the latest news. Jane told him. She also mentioned that his friend Warde was working in the pearl fleet.

"No!" McDougall exclaimed, and then, after a thoughtful silence, "What became of his own lugger, then?"

"It was smashed and broken, driven one night up against the piles of the pier."

McDougall looked up at the tent on the slope and commented dryly:

"Weel, the pier is nae place for pearl fishing. 'Tis many a mile out from Nyasha pier that a man must go for the shell."

Jane's face flushed a little.

"Mr. Warde's diver left and went over to Blackham, and a couple of the shell-scrappers died."

"Aye," said McDougall, nodding his head. He shot a keen glance at Jane, then, cleaning his pipe preparatory to lighting it, he added, slowly, "Weel, I must be goin'."

But he made no movement beyond the door.

Standing there he said casually, and with apparent conclusiveness :

"Is there any truth in the rumour that Blackham's lassie is for always going now on the schooner for the sake of the trip?"

"You mean Talumeni?"

He nodded. Then filled his pipe slowly and carefully.

"Aye, Talumeni. Is there nae truth whate'er that she's slantin' her long black eyes in his direction?"

Jane looked at him with startled, half-indignant eyes. She flushed hotly as she bent her head over the counter that she was dusting vigorously.

"I have never heard," the words seemed to be forced from Jane. She left the counter and went towards a corner, brought back a bucket of water and a mop. She began without looking at McDougall to mop the counter.

"Weel, it's nae true then," said McDougall easily. He began to puff at his pipe. "I think I'll be goin', Jane. I'll be camping up on the slope the night, an' maybe if ye have time ye will be checking the invoices and the foods I brought."

He handed her a sheaf of papers and went.

Jane drew back into the shadow of the window, and watched the bullocks rise obediently at McDougall's

call from their siesta in the dust of the road. The wooden yokes swayed from side to side, the wheels rattled, the ponderous waggon went on its creaking way. Jane watched it until it turned the corner, and began its slow, tortuous progress up the slope to where, a few yards below the white tent, McDougall pitched his, and, lighting a brisk fire, hung his tin billy from two cross-sticks.

"It's not true," said Jane passionately. "It is not true. It doesn't matter to me or any one else whether it is or not, but it's not true."

Far out at sea among the pearl fleet a little way from the others a man was drawing over his head and shoulders the diving-suit of canvas. The native crew were already grouped in their places, one making ready the life-line and air-pipe by which the diver is supplied with means of breathing ; another stood by to slacken or pull up the chain attached to the shell-bag. The remainder lounged round, ready to work the pumps that supply air to the toilers of the sea.

It was after four, and at four-thirty the light failed in quality and quantity.

Warde, with one of the other divers, had been up and down in turn since daybreak. The time varied from two minutes to one hour, or according to circumstances, and in case of the more experienced diver to one-and-a-half hours.

From the heaps of shell scattered on the lower deck, Pedro Blackham came, followed by his daughter.

He grunted in dissatisfaction.

"Beastly poor showing for the day," he com-

plained. He motioned away the native who stood by the shell-bag chain. "I think I'll take his place," he added superciliously, "and see if I haven't more luck."

"Let me," said Talumeni. She smiled shyly at Warde, her little white teeth showing. "Perhaps it is, I, Talumeni, who will bring the luck. If so it is my pearl."

Blackham grunted and stood aside, watching the native tender fastening the diving dress on the Englishman.

"Good luck!" said Talumeni, leaning over the rail, as they lowered him over the side. The waters splashed softly and Blackham surly slackened the chain. Talumeni still leaned over the rail, her offer forgotten. She began to sing, half croon the haunting melody that seemed a favourite with her of late.

"Damn you!" said Blackham irritably. "Why do you sing that wretched thing? It gets on my nerves."

"Anything gets on your nerves," retorted Talumeni, and she went on with her singing, unperturbed, but in a lower voice. The white tunic she wore to-day was of silk and the slendang of scarlet was embroidered here and there with pearl-blisters. Talumeni's creations, as far as grace and effect were concerned, could sometimes rival Paquin's. Her dark hair, long and straight, streamed loosely behind her. Her little, dark-skinned face had an unmistakable beauty of feature and expression. There was a wistful line about her mouth, however, as she sang.

Blackham glanced at her once, grunted, then

frowned. He would have laid down his life for Talumeni.

The first thing that Lionel Warde saw as he clambered up to the lugger was the dark beauty of Talumeni's face.

As he came out of the water he saw her as in a blurred vision with the fluttering whiteness of her gown about her, and her little sandalled feet tip-tapping against the lower rail.

The natives hauled him awkwardly aboard. Blackham was already turning out the shell-bag with his usual complainings.

Warde emerged from the diving-dress, and stood before them in his white suit, his fair curly hair tumbled.

He smiled back cheerfully enough at Talumeni, who coquettishly taking from the coils of her black hair the crimson hibiscus, broke off a blossom and offered it to him. Her lips moved and he bent to hear.

"Find," called Blackham excitedly. There was a clattering as the hard shell slipped. "Find."

He was holding something in his hand, something that milky-white from a distance glowed in peerless beauty.

"It's a pearl," announced Blackham. "A pearl, and a beauty at that."

"Is it worth much?" said Warde. For the moment he was curiously glad that he had proved worthy of his hire. Pearls of much value had been scarce. There had been pearl-blisters in plenty, but Blackham's excitement showed that this was something out of the ordinary.

"It is worth," Blackham was saying excitedly, "anything from five thousand to seven thousand pounds."

The excitement had communicated itself to the other luggers. The news spread. Down in the hold the empty shell was searched and researched for treasure.

In less than an hour the parent-schooner had left the fleet and was sailing homewards.

To-night it brought Warde. On the waters before him the lowering sun flung a path of red and gold, rippling and slowly shortening.

Talumeni fluttered past, then came over to his side and began to prattle quaintly of many pearl finds, of the treasure of the deep.

Lionel Warde only half listened. It came to her that on his face was the same look that had been there a day long ago, in an hour of dusk, when the young Englishman had taken the cliff path by the sea and the torn paper fluttered in the darkening background.

Indeed he forgot altogether the presence of Talumeni at his side.

The schooner throbbed her way across the water to the white line of the shore ; native huts showed, rising on their high slim stilts, and beyond on the green, the little town with the black crouching hills seemed very near.

All at once his excitement died, and a great weariness came upon him. The native huts and the curving beach, the dark hills all became a blurring, moving mass before his eyes. He no longer saw the cliffs rearing themselves at one end of the island, nor the stunted eucalyptus by the desert leaning away from

the wind. He was in an English garden, where there came neither the troubled sound of the sea nor the troubled sound of the world. The tall, prim spruces and pines lifted their heads. The acacias and the willows murmured in the wind that came dripping over the downs. The tall, stately house, grey of stone, weather-beaten with centuries, stood its ground, looking out over the terraces and green, smooth-shaven lawns dropping down to a river at the foot of the garden ; somewhere high overhead a lark was carolling blithely. A great longing for it all broke over him in a flood. He bent under it, through a haze golden as the hair of Muriel—he saw for one moment her face.

At his side in the schooner, Talumeni crooned her little haunting song.

CHAPTER VI.

WINTER broke over Nyasha with muttering storms and torrential burst of rain, a furious downpour that flung a grey winding sheet over the desert and blurred the tall trees, lashed the pines on the slope and flooded the valley beneath. The road became a quagmire and for one month traffic was almost impossible. The wheels sank to the axle in mud.

Winter came with no half measures to Nyasha.

There were days when the sky, black as ink, boomed forth thunderous sounds, or crackled across zig-zag lines of disappearing flame ; over the mountains the lightning played in terrifying, chain-like patterns and the gaunt trees bent before the force of the winter storms, or were split, with a thousand resounding crashes in the hills, from top to bottom.

For Jane, the season's storms had no terror. Winter made her work in the stores lighter. Mails came less regularly.

Out on the road that led to the hills, on the wide blurred stretch of the tussocky desert or the wind-

swept beaches of the sea, you could see Jane, ploughing her way, wrapped in her macintosh and hood, with the ends of her rain-bonnet fluttering behind her, the rain and the wind in her upturned face, her feet encased in small but heavy boots. She gloried in the storms. Jane was a child of nature ; long years in the Australian bush in silent places, with the sound of the sea and the murmuring of the gaunt trees in her ears, had brought her very close to the wild spirit of the storm and the note of serenity that ran through its passionate utterance.

Jane and her dog tramped all the country near in that winter : Jane, with the colour stinging in her face from the onslaught of rain and wind, and by her side the big grey mongrel that long ago she had rescued.

The second Mrs. Dunkley and some of the family came back for a space in that winter, and the quiet house attached to the stores regained a rather fretful, complaining atmosphere. .

The second Mrs. Dunkley, staring out of the sitting-room window after Jane had left, remarked fretfully :

“ I can’t understand how Jane can waste her time so, instead of doing some fine needlework or fancy-work. It would be much more ladylike. But to expect Jane to be ladylike is to expect the impossible.”

Old Silas, reading his book, only grunted an answer. Outside, the rain poured down in a steady drizzle that blurred the windows. In the garden attached to the old-fashioned house the flowers

drooped limply or bent to the earth and were trodden in the mud.

"As for Jane's future, I dread to think of it, Silas," Mrs. Dunkley was in for an hour of complaining. Perhaps Jane, forewarned by experience, had recognised the symptoms and had chosen the better part by hastening her departure. "Jane will be an old maid, or she will marry that Ransome boy. I cannot see anything else before her."

"Ransome is not a bad sort, Isabel."

Isabel Dunkley shrugged her shoulders.

"He is only a mainland farmer. He hasn't so very much money."

Old Silas only said "Humph!" and returned to his book, but Mrs. Dunkley would not be put off the subject. She walked restlessly up and down the room.

In the fireglow it was rather a cheery place, with its freshly papered walls and low dado of dark painted wood, and its wide window seats with red curtains.

Mrs. Dunkley saw no beauty in it, nor indeed in anything in Nyasha. Only the fact that Nyasha supplied the social mill with financial grist, and that Dunkley always insisted quietly but firmly that she should spend at least six months of the winter at home, made her lead a grumbling existence there. The second Mrs. Dunkley never served in the stores. She would have fainted in the most ladylike way at the very suggestion of it.

"Is Ransome still paying Jane attentions, Silas?"

"Oh! he's still courting her."

Isabel Dunkley glanced at her husband and

shuddered fastidiously. She thought Silas was very coarse in his terms sometimes. "Doesn't she say anything about it?"

"She doesn't seem to notice it."

His wife frowned.

"Nonsense, Silas! You have all the influence over Jane; why don't you talk to her about it?" Silas yawned, and lifted his eyes from his book. He glanced at his wife, attired in a gown that was certainly ultra-fashionable as far as Nyasha was concerned. The light from the window fell on her thin, fretful profile and showed up plainly the coating of powder and rouge. Silas sighed.

"There's some things you can't speak about; anyway, old girl, I'm in no hurry to lose Jane."

"I do wish, Silas, that you wouldn't address me in that manner. It is anything but refined."

Silas laughed as he came over to her, and passed his arm about her shoulder. He was still very fond of the second Mrs. Dunkley. His eyes twinkled.

"Very well, Lady Dunkley. It shall be as you wish."

Through the blurring rain outside a tall, muffled figure passed. He saw the two figures at the window and raised his dripping hat.

Mrs. Dunkley bent forward with sudden interest.

"Who is that, Silas?" she asked, staring after the tall figure making its way through the misty rain. He, too, turned towards the wide, open stretch of the desert. In another instant the mist and the rain swallowed him up. "Who is that?"

"Oh! a young chap from England," he answered carelessly. "He comes here sometimes. Jane did

say something the other day about him getting letters with a black coronet stamped on the back."

"A coronet!" Mrs. Dunkley was immediately interested. "Then he must come of a good family."

Old Silas shrugged his shoulders carelessly. He spoke a little dryly. "It all depends on what you mean by good, I suppose. For the life of me I can't see why a title nowadays which really means nothing when you look into it, should imply goodness. According to rumour it often stands for the reverse."

His wife moved impatiently. "Of course, you don't understand, Silas. You Australians are all alike. You have no reverence for position."

"Why should we, my dear?" He laughed easily. "We are an independent race. We look not at the title a man holds but at the man himself. We judge him by himself. A title may cast a halo in England. It doesn't matter a cent out here. Why, I remember there used to be a cabdriver over the mainland who was the son of an earl. He afterwards succeeded to the title and a lot of mortgaged estates. There was no money to keep them up. He sold them all, and put the money he got into a fishmongering business. He made a very good fishmonger."

"How dreadful!" Mrs. Dunkley gasped at the vision. "I have always maintained that Australia coarsens people. The atmosphere is too—too socialistic. These dreadful Labour people have ruined the country."

Dunkley laughed good-humouredly. One time he had stood for Parliament also. But the electorate

had decided that he made a much better grocer than politician.

" You should cultivate his acquaintance," his wife was saying severely.

" Whose ? The fishmonger's ? "

" Don't be absurd, Silas. I mean the boy who has just passed. What is he doing in Nyasha ? Touring ? "

" He is working for Pedro Blackham," answered Dunkley dryly. He had returned to his book, and the mood for silence was enveloping him again. " He began by scraping the shells and paying out the life-line. Now he is doing the diving. They say he is a good diver. The boy has pluck."

Mrs. Dunkley held up her hands in protesting horror. A little later she was telling the story to Gwendoline, her eldest daughter. Gwendoline's tiny retrousseé nose upturned a little more during the recital. In the bored, drawling way that was very fashionable in the South country schools, because it was considered so English, she made a few comments on it. Mrs. Dunkley hunted up a worn copy of the Baronetage and Peerage and pored over it for the rest of the day. Its perusal brought the colour of excitement to her cheeks.

She made, during the tea-hour, an irrelevant remark, astonishing because of its sincerity, that she was sorry that they were leaving Nyasha so soon, on account of the mid-winter holidays ending. She and Gwendoline, she added, must certainly return early in December.

Meantime, on the road that led down to the sea beaches and then struck abruptly upwards and

desertwards, Jane Dunkley and her dog were walking briskly.

The amphitheatre of hills was blurred and veiled, but now and again, through a rift in the drooping clouds, Jane caught a glimpse of their regal purple and grey-green.

Before Jane the desert unrolled misty, the soil brown and wet, the wiry tussocks in their green winter garb. The wind blew through them with now and again a note as from a mighty organ ; sometimes, too, there came a sweeter tremulous note, a deep minor chord.

To Jane the desert that morning was as a green harp, thrilling under the soothing fingers of the wind. It became the Harp of Life and on it was played a melody, a sweet haunting and haunted memory that stirred and troubled her as she had never before been stirred.

She could not understand it. She had lived among these hills on the border of this desert, had taken the desert road many times, had heard the winds in the gaunt eucalyptus and in the blackness of the rugged pines. Always it had conveyed some meaning to her, something soothing and refreshing, something exhilarating, a peace that wrapped her about in its soft garmentage. She had always loved the desert, and the great hills in all their changing glories. The folk of Nyasha, had Jane voiced her fancies, would have laughed at them, would have scorned the idea of beauty in a barren stretch of land that had no utility, and in which only the wiry tussocks and wild cactus struggled for life. Yet at sunset when the path of life streamed over the blue swaying waters

of the Indian Ocean and glowed in suffused lights and quivering, ever-changing shadows of orange and purple over the desert, a strange, ecstatic feeling always flooded the soul of Jane Dunkley.

She was no longer plain Jane standing quietly on the worn wooden doorstep of Dunkley's Stores, her face turned to the desert. She was a creature caught up in its mysterious glow of colouring, whirled around in it, part of the sun-glory, part of the shadow, a wild thing of the sunset that danced and whirled in rainbow garb, drooping suddenly as the sun drooped, and then a shadow of the shadows crouching behind the great world-stirred tussocks.

The mist lay on the desert now, and Jane moved through it, part of the mist, part of the wind, a grey sprite enfolded in it. And over the harp of the desert the soothing fingers of the wind played. The misty vapour before her mellowed and reddened.

Jane lifted up her voice and followed the melody ever so softly. Here and there the notes that she followed began to shake her heart. At last she dropped into silence.

Stirred and shaken, she went more slowly, her hand on the old dog's shaggy head. Something was entering her life; something new and strange; meaningless, yet full of meaning. What was it? She stretched out her hands to it; her mind groped in all its recesses for it, but like a Will-o'-the-Wisp or a dancing lantern-fly, it persistently eluded her.

Through the mist and the drizzling vapour of rain a voice called. It came from far away at first, caught and flung back by the wind, and Jane only heard it as

something strange and elusive, a meaningless thing full of meaning.

So Lionel Warde came to her idly, along the leaf-sodden camel track, and when Jane turned, and he saw her face, he stared at her as if he saw a stranger.

The grey of the day and the swift falling dusk were about her, encircling her tall and slim form. Her hair collected in damp tendrils, and her grey eyes were full of a wistfulness and a joyousness, and a light as if tears were not far off.

The only colour about her was on her wind-stung cheeks and her hair. For the first time it came to Warde that Jane was neither plain nor uninteresting. She was aglow with life, a luring flame flung against the grey background of the day.

" You startled me a little," said Jane. She nodded to him as if he had just come into the store for some article. She laughed. " You see, I am used to having the desert to myself on days like this." There was a lilting, joyous note in her laughter. It stirred a new exhilaration within him, a quicker pulsation in his blood. Some of the care fell from his shoulders. The sorrow that clung close and dogged his footsteps was gone.

It would come back again. Somewhere in the background, ready to pounce, it waited. Sorrow always crouched near, out of sight perhaps for an hour, hounded off by laughter and light and music, but always there when the door shut on these things.

" You have been walking for hours," he said. " I saw you over two hours ago down by the sea, and climbing the cliffs."

Jane laughed and pleaded guilty. She pointed out

a mile away a dark clump of trees showing through the mist.

"That is the limit of my walks in the desert," she said. "I have always longed to climb the mountains ; but they are twenty miles away."

"Do they end the desert ? "

"No. They fling their huge bulk across. Behind them the island narrows slowly to a thin point. You know Nyasha is pear-shaped. Well, the narrowest part comes to a point far behind the mountains ; where the stem should be is a narrow strait, the nearest but most dangerous passage to the mainland. At one time Nyasha was part of Australia, a narrow promontory. The seas washing against the stem of rocks and sand—the island is very flat just there—have made a passage through. Some of the old aborigines of Western Australia maintain that they remember the natural bridge of land that bound Nyasha to the continent itself."

They had walked on. Involuntarily now they both turned and looked back at the little township. The houses in the one street grouped themselves together, next to the shining tin bulk of Dunkley's Stores ; the white of the house showed against the black cluster of trees behind it. Towards the coastline the thatched roofs of the native huts, perched on their quaint stilts, showed plainly, and behind them the white-foaming sea flinging itself forward from the heaving grey mass of the waters.

They tramped on together, Jane, with the colour glowing on her face, speaking of the country, showing in every word and gesture her love of the desert and the sea and all that was of Nyasha.

He began to see through her eyes as they went on. She limped ever so slightly at any time. One hardly noticed it as she made her way along the path or struck across the tussocky land to the clump of trees.

She spoke of these things that delighted her, that were close to the heart of her ; a slim, straight pine dropping with rain against the skyline, with the sunset burning behind it like leaping flame ; the white ghost of a stricken gum blasted by lightning, with its stark arms flung outward as if in agony ; the new green grass slowly covering the rotting splinters at her feet ; the changing shadows of the mountains ; the peace of the stars ; dancing laths of sunlight intermingled with shadow in a long fragrant aisle of eucalyptus. All these things meant something to Jane. They began to mean something to Lionel Warde. He began to see with her eyes the friendliness and cheer of a camp-fire against the darkness, the red, steady, beckoning glow, and to appreciate the gift of a silence such as only the Australian bush knows, the thrill of the ringing sound of the splitters' axes in the jarrah-timber.

They came to the circle of trees and sat on a fallen log. Jane's frank comradeship enveloped him. At their feet the desert sloped flatly away to the rain-misted town.

" You will learn to love our country," Jane was saying eagerly. To Jane, Nyasha and Australia were always one. The thin line of the straits never mattered. In her fancy the connecting stem of land was still there, under the water that foamed over it. " You will love our country. Many Englishmen have come. They have grumbled and said hard

things of the land often, but very seldom of the people.

"At first, being reserved, they are suspicious, conventionally shocked at our frankness. They consider our independence of thought socialistic English people hide their thoughts, I think," she added characteristically, "and suppress all emotions, on the surface at any rate. Perhaps we err on the other side. A true Australian hides nothing. Everything must be open and wide, unrolled before him like the plains of the desert, for example. The spirit of wide, uncramped spaces and wide, uncramped thoughts is born and bred in us. Now you must tell me something of England as you see it."

As he talked of England she, too, began to see how he had loved his country, how much it meant to him. A little longing began to stir in her to see it.

"But just only once," said Jane. "Just once."

He smiled enigmatically and branched out on to other phases. Once Jane's clear laugh rang out amusedly.

"Chaperons?" she said. She laughed again; a little thread of scorn ran through her laughter. "Doesn't that make a girl very dependent, blot out, as it were, individual personality, rob her of individuality, make her unwilling and rather incapable of acting for herself?"

She was silent for a little while. "Oh, I should never feel free," she went on; "I must have space, a place alone for myself to walk in, to think my own thoughts, to have an untrammelled creed more human than ritualistic. Ritualism to me has always meant

effeminacy of person as well as thought. It cramps and obscures the human and finer issues. Like a draped window, it shuts out the light. It treats the soul as the Egyptians treated their mummies. It binds them with wrappings afterwards." She returned to the question of chaperonage again. She laughed happily, pointing with her hand across to the mainland.

"Once," she said, "I travelled for days towards the Interior. The Interior is that northland stretch of country; it extends from the practically unknown north of West Australia across the northern territory. It is a wonderful country, weird and strange, silent and yet full of sound. I had heard of a great rock slanting out of the desert waste, a rock on which strange hieroglyphics were carved hundreds of years ago by aborigines, the ancient dwellers in Australia. I wanted to go. My father would not have allowed me to go had I asked him. So I went without him knowing."

She drew a deep breath.

"Oh, it was well worth any risk! Of all the strange wonderful country, there is none like the Interior. We were living on the mainland at the time. I went eastward and northward, making towards the Interior. Miles beyond that, the great rock towered, a very sphinx of the desert. There were giant ant-hills everywhere. You could not imagine what they were like, but once you saw them you would never forget them. I had an old aborigine servant and Ramble with me." She bent over and touched the shaggy head of the dog beside her affectionately.

He raised his old half-blind eyes and looked at her,

his shaggy head lifted as if listening to the recital. He gave three short barks as if of understanding.

"The heat is like water seen through glass. It quivers and dances in waves, or curls spirally up from the grass. I had expected everything to be dried and withered, but the grass had just donned its winter green and the flowers were all in bloom. I have seen beautiful wild flowers, but none of such beauty. Wild orchids and violets in profusion, great golden masses of wattleblossom were everywhere."

For a moment she paused. In fancy the girl saw it all again : the wonderful fairy casket of flowers at her feet, the green swordsheaths of the grass, the bluebells clustering like a border, the quivering fairy-grass among the fallen logs and the cry of the curlew by the creeks, the tittering of the plovers.

"From horizon to horizon the sun shining, the heat quivering and rising tremulously, and the long cool nights of infinite silence and the great dome of stars, and among them all the southern cross drifting slowly, drifting down over the rim of the world, and one slept."

She turned suddenly towards Warde.

"Do you know," she began boyishly, "I somehow can imagine you out there. Some day perhaps you may go ; who knows ? There is a great sweep of country there, and fortune in the making. If you go to the Interior, promise me that you will see the Rock of Tirla, the sphinx of the Australian desert."

"Tell me about it," he begged.

She sighed then. "I do not know how I can describe it. It gave me a queer feeling that day when

towards dusk I saw it. It seemed to loom suddenly out of space—to tower over the desert. The Egyptian sphinx must be a wonderful sight, but I think nothing can be half as weirdly imposing as the Rock of Tirla. Imagine a great stretch of country behind one, fringed with ragged mimosas, with gaunt grass, with giant jarrah and fern ; in the foreground great wide spaces streaming out as far as the eye can reach ; and the rock of Tirla rising out of a strange yellow plain dotted with hundreds of tall cone-shaped ant-beds, miniature broken coliseums . . .”

Her eyes shone eagerly on him, her lips were parted. He leaned nearer, caught up in the scenes she pictured. Beneath their feet from the sodden pine-needles, a faint perfume stole up to them, subtle as incense.

“ It was lonely and yet not lonely, for one’s thoughts peopled it. Billy Kari the aborigine was afraid to approach the rock, so I went alone, leaving him at our last camp. I shall always remember looking back across the swift falling night and seeing the red glow of the camp-fire twinkling a friendly message across the darkness.”

Jane was of her country. He seemed to see her moving slowly across the weird, ant-bedded desert, a free exultant thing, glorying in her country of a thousand changes, glorying in the freedom and independence that were the very breath of it. He saw her slim grey figure moving onwards, and heard the camel’s feet padding softly into the purple reaches of the night.

“ And there comes understanding there, and a wonderful peace and rest,” Jane was saying. “ When

understanding comes, one learns to endure and hold on, never looking back."

He did not answer immediately. The black pines rustled above their heads. A cricket chirped somewhere in the short grass near. When he did speak there was a new note in his voice. It breathed of hope, of endurance, but there was wistfulness in it also.

"One learns to endure—and to go on—never looking back," he repeated, gazing across to where the town of Nyasha showed in the distance. "But—it takes a long while for some people to learn that lesson, Jane."

Jane was too straightforward to pretend to misunderstand him.

"You will learn the lesson," she said.

She was rising, drawing the fluttering strings of her hood closer, and tying them; a faint flush had come into her face, at his unconscious use of her name. A little thrill fluttered unaccountably through her veins.

He still sat on the fallen log. There fell a silence between them. Jane, looking down at his face, saw that he was no longer conscious of her presence.

"Of what are you thinking?" she asked, and then softly, "Already you are looking back."

He roused himself with a start, and stood up quickly.

"I'm afraid it has grown into a habit," he confessed. He straightened his broad shoulders, then held out his hands and caught those of Jane in his warm clasp. "But you will help me, Jane," he said. "Let us be real friends. I have been lonely in Nyasha, but less lonely since the day I first met you.

Do you know that there is much of boyishness in the frank comradeship of your nature? You should have been a man, Jane. You would have made a fine comrade, a splendid friend."

Her head was bent. She lifted her face and she was smiling, but there was a faint trouble in her eyes. The little flush on her face had faded and left her pale, a little weary-looking. It came to him then all of a sudden that Jane was far from strong.

" You are cold sitting here so long," he said, with sudden remorse. " Forgive me, Jane. I am afraid I am rather a thoughtless and selfish mortal."

Jane smiled, and the colour came back to her cheeks again. They stepped out briskly on the road towards Nyasha, across the desert plains.

CHAPTER VII.

HE had been speaking again of England, and more personal things, of his home, of all it had meant to him. Unconsciously he was opening his heart to Jane of Dunkley's Stores as he had never opened his heart before to any man or woman.

Maybe it was the grey weeping skies above, that brought back to him his beloved England. Maybe it was a return of the very passion of longing and homesickness that had shaken his very soul that day at the end of summer when the schooner throbbed its triumphant way towards Nyasha. He did not pause to analyse his feelings or seek for a reason why he was pouring out his heart to the girl from the stores. He could not, perhaps, looking back to the years and the strength of the Warde pride, find an explanation. All that he was conscious of was that on a grey wet day he was tramping across the plains of Nyasha, with a comrade—just that—a comrade to whom one felt one could open one's heart.

"And some day," said Jane, in her fresh young voice, "some day you will go back there."

"Yes." That was all he said for the moment, but the one word expressed everything. His voice had a ring in it of determination that set her heart aglow. She knew then that the hurt in some measure had healed. Here was no longer the bitter revolt of those first days in Nyasha. In place of revolt had come ambition, the desire to do and dare, to "make good."

Jane was glad that it was so. Hers was a nature ever ready to spur on, to help, to point out the way, to show where the sun was shining. Jane had told herself that as she had always helped a heterogeneous collection of human beings and dumb animals in the past, so she had striven, with a word in the right place, a suggestion here and there, a frank welcome, to help Lionel Warde.

She and old Silas Dunkley had helped many a soul, set many a man on his feet. It was an unwritten law in Nyasha that one always went to old Silas Dunkley or Jane in any emergency, and it said a great deal for the personality of both that seldom was their hospitality or help abused. Jane and her father had a deep-rooted faith in human nature that nothing could shake. If one failed there was always a fund of excuses.

This spirit of ambition, of returning desire for the Homeland, the desire to "make good," so as to make the return there possible, was the spirit that Jane had most wished to see in Lionel Warde.

She was wise for her years, and she had known that with Time's tender healing all things were possible.

Healing, and its resultant healthy ambition, had come to Warde sooner than she expected.

She was glad. Her heart glowed. For Jane there was no greater glory on earth than the returning spring of life, the burying of an old, unhappy self and the resurrection of the new; nothing more glorious than the casting off of the slough and the chrysalistic evolution of a better self.

That was Jane Dunkley's religion, unfettered by creed, promulgated by no priest or minister. It had not changed since the days of her childhood, when deeply grateful for anything—for the beauty of a growing flower, or a sunset, or the things of nature that so deeply stirred her—she had found some quiet place where no eye saw, and lifted her face to the heavens and said simply, "*Thank you, God.*" She was glad. Her heart glowed. Yet suddenly it seemed a strange thing to her that all at once and without any reason, the day had become a grey, depressing thing. There was a chill touch in the wind that seemed to have robbed her cheeks of their colour. She felt cold and a little weary. She turned her head and looked across to the blurred greyness of the sea.

Warde's voice had taken on a new hopefulness. He walked with his head flung back, his shoulders well set and no longer stooping. His voice rang.

"So now I shall stay until I make good," he was saying enthusiastically. "I will give another season to Nyasha. I shall work no more for Pedro. I shall have my own lugger, for I have saved sufficient for the necessary deposit at any rate. And some day, Jane"—he turned to her smiling—"perhaps I shall come to you and say, 'Look at this,' and spread

on the counter some wonderful pearls, and one," he added briskly, " shall be for my comrade's wearing."

Jane flushed and laughed. She, too, walked more blithely, caught up in the infectious optimism of the hour.

He swung back to the topic of his home again. In him was the deep-rooted trait of the Englishman, the love for his own home and fireside.

"I would like to see you there," he said once casually.

"Me?" Jane laughed. "I somehow don't think I would fit in the picture. Imagine it: in my short skirts, high leather leggings, and thick boots, and a blouse turned by many washings into a doubtful hue and a hat ten seasons too late."

He laughed joyously. "It wouldn't matter one bit."

"The family portraits would spring out of their very frames in horror," Jane asserted. The curling tendrils of her hair fluttered in her eyes as they turned to a bye-road that dipped abruptly towards Nyasha.

She lifted one freckled hand and brushed the rebellious strands back. It was a little roughened, that hand of Jane's, by work and weather, but small and very shapely, with long slender fingers.

He broke off abruptly from what he was saying, and said suddenly, "Do you play the piano, Jane?"

"In a way of my own." She spread out her hands and looked at them critically. They were clean and well-kept. "I play to myself, but not when the family are at home, as now. It appears to make them quite ill." She laughed as if at some memories that

amused her. "You see, the girls, my step-sisters, have been well trained by some very good teachers. They have had a better education and more musical advantages than I." All at once more grave she grew, and flushed. "When my mother was alive, we were not so successful in business as we are now," she said slowly. "They, my father and she, worked very hard. Times were often bad in those days. They struggled very bravely."

For a little while she was silent. When she spoke again the laughter had altogether gone from her mouth and eyes.

"It has always been a very sad thing to me that she died just as things were bettering and the days of toil were over. Whenever I read the poem written in connection with *La Bohème*, I think of my mother. Do you know the lines ?

"I said in my heart 'twas a sad, sad thing,
That little Musette, with her brave thin smile,
Should live through the winter—and die in the
spring."

Her young voice died away. Down by the sea the gulls, wheeling out from the cliffs, seemed to fill the silence with their cries, and make it pitiful with its suggestion of a dim world of grief into which the man beside her could not enter.

They walked for some distance in silence. Jane too, it appeared, was looking back. Lionel Warde was thinking with a thrill of sympathy that it was a strange thing that here, in an island flung off from Australia by some unknown forces, a girl with little chances of education read *La Bohème*, and delved

for literary treasure among the stock of sixpenny editions of books that filled the shelves in one corner of Dunkley's Stores. The ragged mimosa dwindled away. The tall gums in two lines, either side of the main straggling street, came into view. The stores in its nest of dark greenness stood out against the grey sea.

They went more slowly along the white sea-shell pathway that led to Jane's home.

"At least I have my father," said Jane irrelevantly ; and he was quite sure that she was unconscious that she spoke aloud, and that she was revealing the inner loneliness of that brave soul of hers.

Dunkley himself came out of the door of the shop, and sitting on the bench under the verandah, drew out a pipe and began to read one of the newspapers that came irregularly to Nyasha.

The girl roused herself. She turned to Warde and smiled, but a little gravely. " You must come in and have tea," she said. " Do."

Warde hesitated.

" But—your people. I think you said your step-mother and the girls are home. If they are fashionable folk they won't perhaps care for the appearance of a stranger on the scene——"

Jane shrugged her shoulders with something of her father in her face.

" I'm quite sure you'll be made welcome by them. There are only two of the girls home, the elder and the younger. The others were invited to stay with some school friends. I can't quite understand their loathing for Nyasha," she added slowly. " They have an intense hatred of the place, but it doesn't

always include its inhabitants." The bright smile flashed to her face.

Silas Dunkley looked up from his paper as their footsteps resounded on the gravel. Jane with an excuse slipped inside while Warde and her father began the evergreen discussion of the weather. Warde heard a door open somewhere in the house, and a querulous voice begin :

"Jane, wherever on earth have you been? There's been ever so many people calling and bothering me over something or other. I do wish you wouldn't leave the shop——"

The voice ceased abruptly. A moment later Mrs. Dunkley came to the door. Introduced to Warde, she beamed on him, and the conversation dealing with the weather became general. From the open door behind them the pleasant rattle of cups and saucers floated out. Some one striking a chord or two on the piano, began to play with faultless technique a Beethoven sonata.

It swept Warde far away to other shores, and for the moment brought him troubled memories of where he had last heard it.

Through a vision of a great hall with glass chandeliers blazing with lights, he faintly heard the voice of the second Mrs. Dunkley.

"That is my daughter Gwendoline playing." There was a flush of pride in her thin, fretful face. "She won the medal only last year at the Trinity College of Music."

The music floated out to them, seated there under the iron verandah. In the narrow gutter below, the rain dropped in a monotonous accompaniment.

The swishing and moaning of the sea sounded very close to them.

Warde had wondered if it were Jane who was playing. The music rose and fell drifting out towards him. He found it hard to swing himself back to his place under the leaning verandah. Was it he who still went on speaking ordinary commonplaces, listening attentively and courteously to all that Mrs. Dunkley was saying? Was this or the other a dream? Was it he who sat here with the rain dripping on the roof and puddling the gutter near, or he that sat in that lighted hall, under a dome blazing with its glass candelabra and decorations of gold, while a great plumed fan of white ostrich feathers waved by him, slowly screening and revealing a little golden head waved and coiffured in the latest fashion, and the dainty shell-like rose of a perfect face turned towards him? There was a little hand, too, so white and rose-tipped, the nails pink and shining, the fingers loaded with sparkling rings. On the left hand that rested so proudly on the satin of the wonderful gown of white and gold, there shone, flinging forth a thousand changing points of light, a quaint old diamond and turquoise ring, the ring of the House of Warde.

Out in the kitchen preparing the tea-tray Jane moved. She hummed softly to herself an accompaniment to the flood of melody that floated forth uninterruptedly from the room that the second Mrs. Dunkley had dignified by the name of drawing-room.

Jane had raised her dark eyebrows and smiled mysteriously to herself when Gwendoline first began to play.

"I wonder why," said Jane to herself, and a moment later, when she went into the room to set a dainty cloth on the polished oval table, she noticed the worn copy of a book lying on the couch by the window. With a little scornful shrug she hid it out of sight, and she sighed as she went into the kitchen.

"God! God!" Warde was whispering to himself out on the verandah, as he came back to the knowledge that he it was who was seated there in reality, and that his vision had been but as the mocking mirages, as barren, dry, and lonely as the desert of Nyasha.

"Tea!" called Jane cheerily. She stood framed in the doorway, her hair glowing redly in the half-shadow. She smiled her wide, friendly smile out on them all with apparent impartiality.

She had hurriedly brushed her hair into a semblance of neatness, and had changed into a frock of warm homespun. Many washings had faded it into a blue that was almost grey. It had originally belonged to Gwendoline. Jane never minded. She was mainly thankful that Gwendoline's old frocks fitted her. She had pinned on a soft muslin fichu. It gave her a quaint old-world air of primness that her laughing eyes and mouth denied.

"Jane has no style," said Mrs. Dunkley fretfully to herself as she led the way indoors. "She looks like a waitress in a pseudo-Dutch tea-shop."

Warde thought he had never seen Jane look quite so charming. For the second time to-day he looked at Jane Dunkley with new eyes. He found himself wondering quite seriously what possibilities for beauty Jane might have in an evening gown of quiet

elegance. It was the first time that he had ever consciously credited her with any pretensions to beauty at all. Mrs. Dunkley and her daughters, Jane herself, would have laughed at the mere suggestion of it.

Jane waited on them all quite cheerfully with the air of use being second nature. She served herself last, and seating herself in a corner chair, looked at them all with the beneficent air of a mother looking after her chicks. They lingered long over the tea-hour. Warde was being rather unwillingly drawn into a discussion of English life by Mrs. Dunkley, who was eagerly informing him that she had spent her earlier girlhood there. She knew a great deal about the counties and the county families, it appeared.

Gwendoline sat near, obviously interested. She stole several side glances at Lionel Warde, and unbent from her bored pose.

Jane, sitting in the tall black chair with its aboriginal carvings, listened pensively. Warde found himself wondering sometimes if she listened at all.

Silas Dunkley joined seldom in the conversation. Now and again he glanced furtively out of the window as if longing for his peaceful pipe and to resume his interrupted reading, and he vanished with a sigh of relief when Jane, catching his eye, obligingly thought she heard some one in the shop calling for her father.

Mrs. Dunkley had drawn Warde into the cosy corner of the window, and was eagerly asking questions about England, the latest operas he had seen, did he know, etc., etc., etc.

Gwendoline, her golden hair catching all the light,

hovered around like a fascinated butterfly. She, too, put out her delicate antennæ of questions. She looked very pretty and charming in the dress of dainty thin silk. It shimmered as she moved.

She began to play again at their guest's special request. Jane, out in the kitchen, helped the one old servant to wash and tidy up, and set the evening meal on its way. She was glad that Mrs. Dunkley and Gwendoline had decided to be gracious to Warde. She had been just a little afraid of the chilliness of the reception they usually gave to her friends or protégées.

How sweet Gwendoline had been, without a sign of sulkiness or frigid patronage! Gwendoline had looked very pretty with her golden hair and its band of brilliant-studded black velvet. A faint wistful envy stole into Jane's heart.

She stood by the kitchen door, looking out to the cowyard, where presently one of her manifold duties would call her, and that wave of wistful envy passed over Jane again.

"I wish that I had been born pretty," she said to herself, with sudden flaring up of passion.

She went down to the yard and let down the three loose rails that served as a gate. In the drawing-room Warde caught the sound of Jane's voice calling in a clear, high tone :

"Polly! Mamie! Myra!"

He wondered if she were calling to some of the native children passing homewards. Her voice sounded very sweet; he pictured Jane leaning over the fence near by and talking to them. He would have much preferred to be out there.

In the room Gwendoline was playing the "Rosary Intermezzo."

Outside in the small yard, deeply sodden under-foot, Jane, with her face pressed for comfort against a heaving roan and white flank, a tin bucket under her hands, was milking the Polly cow.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN the days that followed Warde came often to the old-fashioned house attached to Dunkley's Stores.

The second Mrs. Dunkley—no one in Nyasha ever spoke of her in any other way when referring to her—seemed bent on playing the part of the genial hostess. Gwendoline greeted him and played all her latest music without the usual touch of condescension that characterised her reception of anyone or anything pertaining to Nyasha.

"Some day," said Jane to herself, "when I have time I must have a look at that peerage book."

She was not very certain of what it contained. She would much rather any day read one of the paper editions of the latest novels, or go for long walks across the desert in company with the old dog !

Jane found plenty to do, for the winter was passing and business improving. In another week Mrs. Dunkley would shepherd her flock back to

college and take up her residence in a more social and congenial atmosphere than Nyasha afforded her.

Sometimes Warde would come into the post-office and, leaning against the counter, chat to Jane. He thought that she was growing quieter of late. But then she was always a little *distracte* with the influence of the second Mrs. Dunkley. Only on the long walks, or outside the atmosphere of the house, did Jane seem to be her usual self.

It was seldom now that he met Jane on these walks. He had taken to accompanying Gwendoline Dunkley and her mother to tennis. Jane said she had no time for tennis. She frankly admitted that it didn't appeal to her. There was practically nothing else for him to do in this off season but play tennis or go to the Dunkleys'. Sometimes of late he met there a tall, sunburnt man, with a mop of fiery hair and a heavy sprinkling of freckles, who had an air of finding himself at home.

Mrs. Dunkley never seemed quite gushing in her welcome to this red-haired giant, who, it turned out, owned the homely name of Smith ; but Smith never seemed to mind. He was very friendly with Silas Dunkley and Jane, and it fell to her lot to entertain him. He seemed rather interested in Jane.

"He is wealthy, quite wealthy," Gwendoline Dunkley told Warde as they came home together one afternoon from tennis. It was a day of blue sky and sea, and a wan wintry sunniness. Under the broom of the wind the heavy roads had smoothened and were drying fast. "He has land here in Nyasha, to the eastward, and a great many acres over on the

mainland. He has just built a fine house there. It stands quite close to the shore."

Gwendoline swung her racket as she walked. She was about the same height as Jane, a little stouter in build. She wore a white sports coat and cap. The silk threads shone in the sun.

"Mr. Dunkley and he seem very friendly." For a moment he hesitated, half inclined to include Jane's name, then changed his mind.

Gwendoline shrugged her shoulders. She had a little affected laugh. It tinkled unmusically now. She made an enigmatic remark: "I suppose he feels he may as well be." And she shrugged her shoulders again with a tired air of resignation.

He thought she desired to change the topic, and struck out into other matters. The conversation somehow, if they had analysed it, had a habit of eddying round to Jane.

"Jane used to worry me," remarked Gwendoline lightly. "She has such queer ideas. It is really wicked to have such socialistic and *labour* ideas and views as Jane inflicts on one. In spite of all mother says, she can never get Jane to take the proper view of things."

They had been strolling slowly along.

Mrs. Dunkley, who was a little further back on the road, having stopped to talk with one of the inhabitants, now rejoined them.

She broke into the conversation with a sudden sigh.

"She was always most difficult even as a child. No refinement, Mr. Warde, no refinement at all, nor

apparent desire for it, and a most queer combination. Reads such a medley of books, unspeakable things like Hector Gross's works, and yet she has the most innocent mind in the world. What she doesn't understand in them she just passes by. Happily they simply contain no meaning. I don't think Jane will ever grow up."

"Like Peter Pan," was all the comment Warde made. He felt a dull resentment against something or somebody smouldering in him. "I have always found her a rather fascinating study," he added. "She is so unspoiled, altogether charming."

Mrs. Dunkley smiled tolerantly. Gwendoline's lips curled a little. The conversation drifted into other channels.

They came to the house and entered the long low room that had become familiar to Warde. There was a fire glowing redly in the grate; the red flame of scarlet geraniums in the window boxes. The fire-light shone on the brasses and the dark old-fashioned furniture and the crimson cushions piled on the settee by the hearth.

On the table the polished silver tea things sparkled in the fireglow. They were old and quaint wedding presents of the first Mrs. Dunkley dragged forth from some dim recess to the light of day.

"Tea, Jane," called Mrs. Dunkley.

A little later Jane came in. She greeted Warde without the least mark of surprise.

"I am glad to see you," she said as always, and her honest smile shone on her face. She had on a white working apron, and her sleeves were rolled up to the elbows. Gwendoline viewed her in disgust. The

brand of baking was on her forehead, a little of the flour powdered her red-brown hair. Mrs. Dunkley sharply drew her attention to it. "I've been baking scones," she said. She stood on tiptoe and peered at herself in the glass over the high mantelshelf, and laughed. Warde imagined her brushing back the escaping tendrils of her hair as she bent over the flour-bag or the baking-dish in the kitchen.

She went out to bring in the hot scones. The intervening door left open behind her showed the big white-washed kitchen beyond—the gleaming lids and the tin milk-dishes ranged along the walls, the black range with its glowing mouth, and a glimpse of Jane as she knelt on the floor before it and flung open the oven doors.

She came back, still wearing unashamedly her apron, although the floury brands had disappeared, and bringing in a steaming pile of scones and tea-cakes. The deftly-shaped rolls of butter lay in a glass dish in tiny narrow skirls, reposing on a cool green lettuce leaf. The old native servant followed with the tea. Jane discovering her apron still on, unceremoniously doffed it. The colour was still glowing in her cheeks.

"I have been for a long tramp around the beach," she answered in reply to a question from Warde. "I climbed up to the cliffs and found Talumeni, the daughter of Pedro Blackham, you know, sitting up there all alone. She seemed in a raging temper with all the world, and very sulky. Perhaps Pedro has been beating her. I could see you playing tennis from where I stood. Gwen looked like a white dot from that distance."

"I cannot bear Talumeni," said Gwendoline calmly. "She is such a strange creature."

"She is very lovely," said Jane. "Somehow I always feel sorry for her," she added, with a sigh.

"But you feel sorry for everyone and anyone, Jane," interrupted Mrs. Dunkley frostily.

"But I do think Talumeni is to be pitied," said Jane thoughtfully, nothing daunted. She turned to Warde, explaining : "Pedro Blackham sent her to a very good school in the south. She speaks excellent English, as no doubt you know. She has been very spoiled. None of the white girls here seemed disposed to be friendly, and she will not associate with the natives. She used to talk a great deal to me once. She never comes near lately."

Gwendoline tossed her fair head. "And a good thing, too. Really, Jane, you do carry your friendships too far sometimes. So absurd an attitude, considering she's a half-caste."

"Talumeni cannot help that, Gwen dear," Jane said a little warmly. "Just think of what her life is."

"Please don't argue, girls," Mrs. Dunkley said in a tired voice. "Talumeni has nothing to do with us, or we with Talumeni. You saw a great deal of her, I suppose, Mr. Warde ? "

It was the first time she had ever alluded to the fact of his being employed by Pedro Blackham.

"Yes," he hesitated. "She used to come out very often on the schooner. Nearly every trip it made."

"I never knew she was fond of the sea," said Mrs. Dunkley. She stirred the sugar in her cup with one of the quaint, slender bishop spoons. "I have a dim idea that she once told me she hated it."

"Will you have another cup of tea, Mr. Warde?" said Jane. She was looking straight into his eyes; her gaze was frank, but he fancied it rather questioning. Words McDougall had said to him in reference to Talumeni and her obvious attentions came back to him. He found himself blushing vividly and for no apparent reason under the direct gaze of Jane's eyes.

Jane, sitting by the tea-tray and holding the long-spouted teapot, considered that flush and frowned as she poured out the tea. She wished McDougall had never chosen to favour her with his thoughts in reference to Talumeni. She was rather silent for the rest of the tea-hour, and making an excuse, presently slipped into the kitchen.

There Warde found her a little later, her sleeves again rolled up, deep in the mysteries of the week's baking. She greeted him with the frank pleasure which in his company she always showed.

"Where is Gwen?" she asked. She was sieving through her fingers a white powdery mixture as she spoke. Now she took up a shining tin of milk and poured some of its contents into the wide baking-dish. It descended in a pale cream cascade, foaming a little as it reached the mound of sifted flour.

"She has gone to her room to put on a heavier coat. Mrs. Dunkley and she and I are going for a walk along the beach."

He was watching her busy hands. Now she had taken a wooden spoon and was stirring the mixture in circles. The feathery mound settled, turned into a smooth dough.

"Cannot you come, Jane?"

Jane turned the contents out on to the white baking-board with a practised sweep of her hand. She began to pat the dough into shape. She did not at first answer his question ; when he repeated it she said, her head bent to her work, "I am too busy. It is baking day."

"Oh, bother baking day!" said Warde, with sudden exasperation. "I never see anything of you lately, Jane, and we were to be comrades."

"I did not think you needed me," said Jane. Her voice was a little muffled. She had her back turned to him, and was reaching up to one of the shelves just in front of her for a scone-cutter. She began to cut out the smooth surface of the creamy dough into circles.

He stared at her for a moment, then came over to her ; his hand touched the loose sleeve of her gown ; with the faintest of tremors in his voice, he said suddenly, "Jane, look at me, Jane——"

The last word, the repetition of her commonplace name stirred and thrilled Jane in a way that startled her. It seemed to shake her very soul. A red flame leaped into her face.

"Jane." He bent towards her.

"Oh, there you are!" said Gwendoline a trifle shortly. She danced into the room. "What a dim light, Jane! Only the fire-glow ; how can you see with it?"

Jane did not move. She was still bending over the baking-board, the scone-cutter in her hand. Her sudden movement had resulted in turning an already cut circle of dough into a dubious crescent.

Warde answered lightly.

"Miss Dunkley has just been giving me lessons in baking."

Gwendoline laughed. He wondered why it so jarred on him to-day. "I didn't know you had domestic tastes, Mr. Warde."

"I think I am just acquiring them," he added gravely. He was following Gwendoline to the door.

"Come," said she, with a coquettish glance upwards. She danced out of the room. Somehow, in what way he could not have said, something indescribable about her reminded him in some way of Talumeni Blackham.

Two lines drifted into his mind and out again.

"The colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady,
Are sisters under their skins."

He turned at the door to speak to Jane. "Au revoir, Miss Dunkley."

Jane said in a low voice and without turning, "Au revoir, Mr. Warde."

"Oh, but you're coming back afterwards," said Gwendoline disappointedly.

"Not to-night." Jane heard his answer clearly. "To-morrow the mail leaves southward. I have a great many letters to write."

In the kitchen one could hear the voices at the front door quite plainly. The long and narrow

passage ran straight through from the hall door to the kitchen that branched off widely either side of it, as is the fashion in most colonial houses.

Jane sat down weakly on the nearest chair as the voices died away. She lifted her hand and brushed back the waving hair from her eyes, beflouring herself plentifully.

It was very still in the house itself. In the shop beyond, Silas Dunkley was talking to a customer. Outside in the yard the old native woman was calling the cows in a coaxing broken English.

Jane sat very still, her heart curiously shaken, while the smell of burning scones rose up and called on the world about to witness their predicament.

The old woman Elzar bustled in. She held up her hands as she saw Jane sitting there so very still, while the burning smell of the contents of the oven dominated everything.

“Lawks-a-mussy!” It was Elzar’s one and only exclamation when anything went wrong. It had been the favourite exclamation of a former mistress. Elzar always looked on it as something similar to a witch’s incantation. She dropped on her knees and opened the oven. A cloud of smoke fluttered out and woke Jane from her dreaming. “Them scones is burning, Miss Jane.”

“Oh!” said Jane. She jumped to her feet and flung the new wonderful garb of her dreams from her, and rushed back into her everyday world.

In less than half an hour everything was moving smoothly. All that was visible of the tender dream

that came to Jane Dunkley that day was the light that quivered and danced deep in her grey eyes, and, out on the green grass by the coward gate, a burnt mass that gave off a faint acrid odour and which Polly and Mamie and Myra nosed over scornfully.

Down the road, towards the sea, in the fading light, Warde went, walking as if on air. He heard the voices of the women by his side, answered them. There was an exultant ring in his voice that transmitted itself infectiously to his companions.

They swung down the road towards the beaches, along the path with its overhanging ti-trees, in the shadow of the sheer grey cliff, laughing and talking gaily. Warde found himself answering, laughing and joking and in his heart, a voice was saying, very softly :

“ Two years ago, just two years ago, if you remember, you walked along this very path, and the torn white paper fluttered behind you . . . you thought your life was torn across and across like the paper . . . and now, have you learned the lesson that life is not cramped or confined to one road alone, that the melody of life cannot be played on one frail note ? The harp of life has many strings. There are many roads for the feet, when one passes out at last from the grim-shadowed well men call experience.”

They stood for a moment on an outflung spur of rock, looking far out over the fading sweep of waters. The footing was narrow and Gwendoline stood very near him. Her golden hair shone in the fading light. She put her hand on his arm once to draw his

attention to the effect of the cloud-bank towards which the sun was sinking.

So Talumeni, walking with her father on the path far below, saw them. Their laughter floated down. It mocked her, caught at her heart.

In a passion of words and tears she flung herself down on the deserted pathway. Blackham turned in amaze and ran back. He was rough and coarse, unscrupulous and cruel, but he would have given his life for Talumeni.

"What is it, little one?" he said in rapid Javanese.
"What is it? Tell thy father, Talumeni, *vari*."

He followed her pointing finger. They were in the shadow of a huge clump of ti-trees. Themselves unseen, they could see clearly. Pedro looked and saw the figures in strong relief against the grey cliffs, the sunlight lingering on the waters swaying far below them.

Talumeni broke into convulsive sobbing. Pedro looked long and curiously at the group on the narrow ledge of the rocky spur. He saw the girl's hand rest as if unconsciously on Warde's sleeve, heard the laugh of the young Englishman over something she said, saw the prim form of Mrs. Dunkley, her skirts blowing close and emphasising her thinness.

Pedro Blackham nodded his head slowly.

"So," he said, and then again, "so."

He bent and lifted Talumeni to her feet, and flung his arm about her.

"Fret not, little one," he said in the native tongue. His voice was strangely tender. Significance crept into his words now. "Hast thou ever needed anything that thy father has not given thee? There

is no wish of thine that may be granted that shall not come to pass."

"But this one thing," cried Talumeni passionately, "may not come to pass."

The black crafty eyes looked down into hers.

"So?" said Pedro questioningly. He smiled wisely.

CHAPTER IX.

ON the curve of the white-sanded beach they strolled slowly back. Overhead in the nests of the cliffs, the seagulls screamed and fluttered.

Gwendoline, her arm within her mother's, was talking of their near departure.

"I must send you some postcards of the south," she was saying. "It is so different from here. The people are, of course, of a different class altogether. You must write and tell me what you think of the scenic postcards." She flashed him one of her upward coquettish glances.

"Yes, do," said Mrs. Dunkley.

"Gladly," Warde answered, adding gratefully, "It is so very good of you. I cannot thank you enough for the welcome you have always given me. You have been most generous to a stranger, and one of whom you knew absolutely nothing."

Mrs. Dunkley, thinking of the tattered book, flushed a little uncomfortably. "Oh, but you are not a stranger now, Mr. Warde," said Gwendoline,

ever so sweetly. "I am quite looking forward to renewing our acquaintance in the summer holidays. Did I tell you that I am not returning to college after that?"

"I'm afraid you'll find Nyasha very dull, especially if you have a round of gaieties before you return."

"Perhaps it will not be so dull after all," Mrs. Dunkley answered, with a touch of playfulness in her manner. "We must give some dances."

"Why not give one before we go back, mother?" Gwendoline cried impulsively. She clapped her hands at the very thought. "Yes, mother, why not?"

Warde smiled at the eager face. Mrs. Dunkley appeared to be turning the matter over in her mind.

"Where could we give it?" she said slowly. "The one public hall is in a most dilapidated condition. There hasn't been a dance there for years. The floor is of poor wood."

I think the Shire Council has been storing things there," volunteered Warde. "Rather heavy machinery, too, if I remember rightly. It certainly would not have improved the floor for dancing purposes."

"There's the store in which the sugar is kept." Mrs. Dunkley thought for a moment. "It has a pine floor, not very long laid down. It could be rubbed up by some preparation. Jane is bound to know of something."

"We can get about twenty nice couples; nice, that is, as the white folk of Nyasha go"; Gwendoline made a little expressive *moue*, and began to tick the names off on her fingers. "Yes, just about twenty."

" You've forgotten Bernard Smith, Gwen dear."

She wrinkled her nose and laughed. " So I had. We must have Bernard Smith for Jane's sake . . ."

She felt the sudden start that Warde gave. Her mind, quick and pert, flashed back to the kitchen. She had thought that Lionel Warde had his hand on Jane's shoulder. Afterwards, a second afterwards, she had told herself that it had been only fancy, a trick of the flickering lights in the kitchen.

They were climbing up the rocky steps now, towards the road that led homewards. The ascent was steep, but was a shorter cut. Mrs. Dunkley led the way, declaring she could manage with the aid of the stick she carried. Warde had offered the girl his arm. She clung to it in apparent nervousness as they toiled upwards.

Gwendoline Dunkley set her lips in a thin prim line. She was saying fiercely to herself, while outwardly she smiled and chatted merrily :

" But *who* could be attracted by Jane . . . Jane is plain. She has always been plain . . . she limps . . . there is nothing attractive about Jane in the least. . . ."

Then the thought of Bernard Smith came to her. She set her little white teeth firmly.

" Let us rest here a moment," she urged as they came to a natural seat in the rock. " Mother is so energetic."

Mrs. Dunkley above them turned and smiled.

" I'll go on and wait for you at the top," she called down to them cheerily ; " don't be long."

" I get so tired when I am climbing," Gwendoline informed him. She looked about her dreamily.

"How beautiful the view is, so—so inspiring." Jane, had she been present, would most certainly have had a fit of laughter had she heard Gwendoline find anything in the whole of Nyasha inspiring. "You see that point of the land to the eastward?" and as Warde looked to where a long arm of the land ran darkly out into the sea at the eastward sweep of the island, she said: "Well, Mr. Smith lives there. You have met him at the house, haven't you?"

"Yes." He turned to her, showing sudden interest. "A tall man——"

"Lanky and red-haired." Gwendoline began to gurgle. "He always strikes me as so funny. He has millions of freckles, millions of them, on his face and neck, and his hands." She shuddered daintily. "His hands are so large and red——"

He thought that Jane, if she had been there, would have said in her gentle voice, "But they are honest hands, Gwen dear."

"And hairy at the wrists, ugh!" Gwendoline was continuing. She paused, then, looking out to sea, she said pensively, "And to think that one day he will be my brother-in-law."

"Your—brother-in-law," said Warde doubtfully. He spoke after a short silence. She felt rather than saw that his eyes were on her face. She had a dainty profile, she knew. She showed it to full advantage as she gazed dreamily out over the sea.

"Of course, Jane has told you all about it."

"What?" asked Warde. His voice sounded a little odd.

"About herself and Mr. Smith," replied Gwendoline. She turned her brown eyes towards him.

They looked the soul of candour. Her little scarlet mouth smiled apologetically. "It is of no use our speaking to her about it."

"Then—Mr. Smith and—Miss Jane are engaged?" This time it was he who was looking seawards.

"Oh, for ages!" She yawned, and glanced corner-wise at him. He was leaning forward. His curly mop of hair, the well-shaped hand which supported his chin was all that was visible. She made a little malicious, mischievous *move* behind his back. "Didn't you know, Mr. Warde?"

"No . . . I didn't know."

"Strange," said Gwendoline languidly. "Perhaps it is because we used to tease her so much that she doesn't care to speak about it. She—she really worships him."

A mist came all at once over the brightness of the sea. The sun sank suddenly behind the gathering bank of clouds. The shadows began to creep forth from the cliffs.

Gwendoline rose without any effort of haste. She peered upwards. "There's mother waiting ever so patiently above," she remarked, and then hesitated. "Mr. Warde, you will please not mention it in the house at any time, about Jane. Papa doesn't mind so much really, but mother and I never speak about it."

"I shouldn't think of mentioning it," Warde agreed. He looked tired and rather haggard. "Will you take my arm?"

They toiled up the rest of the way almost in silence, then the three stood at the top and chatted

for a little while. Warde forced himself to be gay. He laughed often.

"Come home to dinner with us," Gwendoline said again, but he shook his head.

"I've been imposing on your hospitality far too much as it is, and I've a pile of letters that must be written to-night in order to catch the mail. The boat goes early to-night, and I must not miss the mail."

"Don't stay up late, then," said Mrs. Dunkley. She gave him her hand in friendly fashion. "You are looking quite pale and tired."

"Come and see us to-morrow, and help us to make plans for the dance," added Gwendoline. She too held out her hand, and let it rest in his for a little longer than usual.

They turned towards the town, he to the cliff path that led to his tent. He preferred it to any of the boarding-houses that Nyasha provided.

But once out of sight of the road, he struck out again for the ways of the sea. This time he went far from the usual beaten track. He sat in a forgotten curve of the cliffs and watched the light die completely away from the sea. He said no word. The light faded and grew dim. The stars began to appear one by one. To-night they held no meaning, brought no message. It was dark and late when he rose. He turned to the sea and spoke then passionately :

"Is there anything in life worth while?" he cried. He struck one clenched hand against the other. "Is there anything in life worth while, after all?"

The sea swayed on murmuringly. The countless white feet of the on-rushing tide swirled whitely in towards the sandy shell-strewn beach. In the ti-trees in the path above the wind was rustling and muttering, like a man turning restlessly and talking in his sleep.

He flung himself away from it ; breathing deeply, he clambered up to the heights, away from the loneliness of his thoughts.

Along the seldom-used path near, light steps sounded as if in answer. A vibrant voice called his name softly.

“ Mistaire Warde . . . Mistaire Warde.”

He came face to face with Talumeni, Talumeni in her white silken tunic. The wind swirled it close to her slim dusky body. In the half-light her face was wondrously beautiful, a beautiful scented orchid blooming suddenly out of a dark and lonely stretch of country.

“ Mistaire Warde . . .”

She was close to him, so close that the perfume of the scarlet hibiscus blew softly on his face. Her black hair streamed out behind her in the wind. Her face, provocative, dangerously alluring, lifted itself to him.

What madness possessed him in that moment, what sense of loneliness answered, he never knew. He stared down at her, seeing and yet unseeing. As one dazed he looked down at the face of Talumeni ; her little hands stretched out, touched his shoulders and clung to him. With a low cry she drew his head down to the level of her passionate lips. So a red giant on his way homeward saw them, saw Warde’s

arms go out and draw Talumeni, daughter of Pedro Blackham, to his breast.

On the soft sand below, his horse's footsteps made no sound, and he swung by them unnoticed and unheeded, with no backward glance.

"It's none of my business," said Smith to himself.
"It's none of my business, anyway."

CHAPTER X.

HE drew up the blinds and opened the windows to the sweeping flood of fresh air of morning.

It blew softly in her face. Jane leaned out. There was a fragrant freshness in the morning that set her pulses dancing.

Leaning over the white-painted sill, she looked out on to a world from which the shadows were vanishing before the swift, upward sweep of the sun. In the rows of white-boled eucalyptus-trees that bordered each side of the street across the noisy clamour of starlings. In the garden to which Jane's bedroom window opened, the magpies were joyously warbling, their rich sweet notes, as clear as a flute, rising and falling in a melodious peal. The faint mist over the sea was rolling swiftly back. The widening path of the sun followed it and danced on the blue waters.

"Life is a wonderful thing," whispered Jane, happily. The colour rose in her cheeks, and a marvellous tenderness of expression transfigured her face.

Jane had the atmosphere about her that belongs to the wild wood wallflowers that blossom in secluded and unexpected places, where the rain falls softly and the sunlight slants on the red-brown glory of them through a greenness of tree and shrub and odorous pine. She cast her pale, shining where she went.

The sun shone down on her this bright wintry morning in July ; but there was a rising sun in the opening heart of her, invisible to the unseeing eye, that cast forth a thousand golden rays. Jane walked in the radiant path of it. It haloed her head. Shimmering and radiant, it stretched to the four corners of the world.

Jane was caught up in the wonderful, tremulous glory of it. It shook her very heart. There was joy and pain and wistful gladness in it. Jane, lifting her face to the morning, to the caress of the wind, said her litany of thankfulness whisperingly, a little brokenly, but more reverently than many a prayer is recited.

“Thank you, God.”

Jane's only cathedral was the world about her. Through the long aisles of the yellow-fringed eucalyptus one caught a glimpse of the swaying blue of the sea. The sun shone golden on the great natural altar of the cliffs of Nyasha. The seagulls, like white acolytes, drifted and dipped in long genuflecting circles over the great grey rocks, and Jane, with her face to the morning, was in spirit on her knees as she said her short reverent pæan of thankfulness. Through the white aisle of a girl's first love, one comes very near to the “ Feet of God.”

From the house came the sounds of doors opened to the day: the first cheery crackling of a fire, the pleasant rattling of cups and saucers, a gentle sizzling sound. The unmistakable and prosaic smell of bacon began to mingle with the perfume of the yellow-fringed goblet blossoms of the eucalyptus, with the dominant pines and the wild riot of winter flowers in the damp, weedy greenness of Jane's garden.

Jane, with one last and lingering look at the morning, turned from the window. In less than an hour you could hear her bustling about the house, sweeping here, moving things there with a cheerful clatter as an accompaniment to her singing that brought forth a sleepy protest from adjacent rooms.

"You are so thoughtless, Jane," said a fretful voice; "do try to have some consideration for people."

"Jane never thinks of any one but herself," grumbled Gwendoline, yawning sleepily. "I wanted to sleep on this morning because of the dance to-night. Why couldn't you have left the sweeping and polishing of the hall until after I wakened?"

"Nonskins, my child," said Jane's voice cheerfully. She began to sing teasingly :

"Get up, little sister,
The morning is bright,
The birds are all singing,
To welcome the light."

"Jane, you can't sing for nuts," protested Gwendoline. "Do shut up! go away for an hour or two—but bring me a cup of tea first."

"Yes, bring some tea," said Mrs. Dunkley fretfully.

"You'd better get up, Gwen," advised Jane. She had lifted the fox rugs from the hall and was shaking them vigorously outside. As a preliminary, she banged them several times against the verandah post.

The second Mrs. Dunkley groaned.

"You've left all the decorations until the last so you'd better get up," insisted Jane. She gazed in the direction of the stores. "There's a golden ton or more of early wattle blossom that some of your admirers have provided for you, and plenty of scarlet sorrel-creeper."

She brought in the tea-tray with its steaming burden and its spotless white cloth, and drew up the blinds in both rooms, allowing the morning sunlight to flood in.

"It's going to be fine weather, anyway," Gwendoline remarked. She sat up in bed and, lifting the lace curtain aside, looked out. The sea and the slope of the pine ridge were plainly visible.

Jane looked out, too. A white tent showed plainly against the dark pines. The blue smoke curled lazily up from a camp-fire in front of it. A man's figure showed against the whiteness of the tent for a moment.

"I can't think what has come over Mr. Warde," said Gwendoline, crossly. "He hasn't been here for several days. I've never seen him near his tent as I passed that way."

Jane had returned to the tiny table that stood by the bed. She was bending over the tea-tray, her face turned from Gwendoline.

"I heard some one in the post-office say that Mr. Warde had been away to Broome for a day or two. He must have returned last night."

"Whatever did he want to go to Broome for?" Gwendoline was in a rather irritable mood. She grumbled at the tea, and complained that the bread and butter was too thick. Her yellow hair was confined in many pins. Later it would blossom out into curls and the soft fluffiness about her face that was considered the latest and most fascinating thing in the circles of the south. She did not look half so pretty in the early morning light. The tight curling pins and the peevish, discontented expression on her face, robbed her momentarily of all her pretensions to beauty.

"To see about a lugger that was for sale. He intends to be his own master in the coming season."

Gwen shrugged her shoulders.

"Most ridiculous for Lionel Warde," she said, crossly. "And without any need. I'm quite sure his relations and friends have no idea that he has been doing the work of a common labourer. Some quixotic idea, I suppose."

Jane said nothing. He had said nothing to Gwen or Mrs. Dunkley then about the reasons that had brought him to Nyasha. A little thrill of gladness ran through her veins.

At the door she turned and looked back at Gwendoline, hesitating.

"Is Mr. Warde coming to help you with the decorations?"

The younger girl looked at her sharply. A momen-

tary and unwilling admiration came into her eyes. Jane, framed in the doorway in the broad band of light that came through the window, looked very fresh and sweet in her faded violet frock. Her hair was brushed back from the forehead, and hung in one long plait, below her waist, tied with a prim bow. She looked very young.

"Of course." Gwendoline turned her face away. She frowned. "If he has forgotten his promise I shall send a note down by one of the natives. Jane, why do you wear your hair in that ridiculous plait?"

"It is neater and much less trouble when I'm working," replied Jane, honestly. "It's so soft that when I wear it in the usual way, it continually tumbles down when I am busy or gets in my eyes."

She brushed away now the little curling strands that no amount of brushing would straighten or keep primly in place. Those tendrils of Jane's red-brown hair always danced rebelliously about her face and ears.

"Mind you see that the catering is all right," the younger girl reminded her. She sipped her tea and daintily helped herself to bread and butter.

"I'm going to begin the baking as soon as breakfast is over. For twenty couples I think you said, Gwen? There are surely more than twenty white girls in Nyasha." She waited, a little troubled. "Why could you not have asked them all, dear? Some of them will be very hurt."

Gwendoline shrugged her shoulders. "Why

trouble as to what their feelings in the matter are? I can't ask everybody."

Jane considered the matter doubtfully.

"The sugar store is quite big enough for eighty couples."

"Is it your ball or mine, Jane?" the girl interrupted her angrily. "How you do spoil everything! It is my ball, and therefore I am just asking whom I like."

"I wish you had included Talumeni."

"A half-caste!" Gwendoline's eyebrows went out. "Really, Jane, you have the most common and vulgar ideas."

"Nearly everybody here asks Talumeni," persisted Jane stubbornly.

"Meaning by everybody, Jane Dunkley and Co.," retorted Gwendoline bitterly. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you went to these people and begged them to include Talumeni."

Jane flushed. She drew herself up.

"Do go away, Jane," a voice from the adjoining room begged fretfully. "Why will you persist in trying to make a quarrel, and upsetting Gwendoline's day for her?"

Jane vanished. Argument, she knew by old experience, was useless.

An hour or two later when a knock sounded at the hall-door, Jane, kneeling in front of the kitchen range, was inserting the tray containing the third batch of pastry.

She flushed as she shut-to the oven door, and rose hurriedly, taking off her apron with fingers that trembled a little. She felt a strange tremor seize

her at that familiar knock that of late had been absent.

Gwendoline, however, opened the door at the first sound. Jane heard her voice.

"I happened to be looking out of the window and saw you coming down the road. Where have you been, naughty boy? It is ages since you have been here."

Then deeper notes responding. To Jane, standing in her kitchen, her heart fast beating, his voice sounded grave—some of the laughing raillery seemed to have gone out of it. The door of the drawing-room shut.

Jane, standing in the kitchen, had a strange feeling that it shut her out altogether. "But he will come here before he goes," she said. She tiptoed into a room near and surveyed herself with a new anxiety in the mirror, wiping the flour off her face and hair. The long-lashed grey eyes in the mirror met hers with a dawning understanding and grave sweetness. They regarded her very seriously. Then the wide mouth trembled into a smile and all at once the eyes danced and laughed back at her. The colour glowed like fire in her cheeks. She sang softly to herself as she bustled about in the long low kitchen, with its smoke-blackened roof and rafters, and its shining lids and pans gleaming in the leaping firelight. Outside, on the green grass where the dew diamonds still lingered and glistened, the sunlight drifted in quivering laths, and changing shadow patterns. The cows lowed softly knee deep in pasture. Under the trees and in the fields far beyond, flocks of sheep browsed. Their intermittent bleatings of content

came faintly back to Jane, the new-born lambs, as small as white blots, bleating after the ewes, and darting unsteadily here and there on their weak legs. Jane's heart went out to all these homely things with a rush of tenderness.

There was the sound of the drawing-room door opening and of Mrs. Dunkley's voice, and then of Gwendoline's.

"We will go straight over to the hall now." She had dignified the store by that title. Jane smiled. It was so like Gwen. "It is all cleaned and scrubbed. The natives did it a couple of days ago, so that it is quite dry, and ready for preparing."

Mrs. Dunkley said something about the decorative effect of the yellow wattle and the scarlet sorrel-creeper. Warde answered something that Jane could not hear, only his following laugh at one of Gwen's sallies.

His footsteps sounded on the polished floor of the hall. Was he coming to the kitchen? The colour flooded Jane's face. She stood quite still, obsessed with a sudden desire to run away, yet unable to move.

The footsteps paused. Lionel Warde went to the rack and took down his coat. Gwen had flung wide the door. Her light laugh floated back to Jane. The three went out of the door together. An air of merriment hovered over the threshold. Then the door closed.

Jane stood quite still for a moment, listening. A faint puzzled look crept slowly into her eyes. For the first time since he had entered the home of the

Dunkleys, Lionel Warde had ignored Jane, had not even called out to her as he went.

Jane went on with her work. There was not only the baking to be done. When the second Mrs. Dunkley and the family were at home the duties seemed to be unending. The old servant and the younger acted as useful help, but were quite unable to cope with it. Jane's broad shoulders took on the burden uncomplainingly.

Jane worked feverishly that morning. Outside from the direction of the sugar store she heard laughter often and the sound of hammering. Several girlish figures appeared and disappeared along the path.

In the kitchen the heat of the range grew. An order came from the dance hall that lunch was to be prepared and sent there. Two native water carriers squatted in the sunshine outside and chatted, waiting till the lunch baskets were ready.

At last, hot and rather weary, Jane saw them trudging down the path, old Elzar following with the coffee and china.

Elzar came back with a message.

"The missee Gwendoline asked that missee Jane would press out the evening dress that missee Gwendoline had left on the couch in her room."

Jane said wearily, "Very well, Elzar." She seemed too tired to laugh to-day at Elzar's quaint delivery.

She put the pressing irons on the fire and went in search of the frock. Gwen had several pretty gowns. Three or more of different colours lay on the

couch. Jane turned them over and decided, in view of her step-sister's changeableness, to press them all.

So while the bright day died away Jane added her humble quota to the success of the dance. When she had finished pressing the dainty silk gowns, she hunted from a cupboard in her own room something that might do for the occasion. There did not seem to be anything that would do at all.

At four o'clock Jane prepared and sent over afternoon tea. A few moments afterwards she went out into the garden and found her way to a seat. She leant against the trunk of a tree, round which the circular garden seat was built, and closed her eyes wearily.

There Lionel Warde, who had insisted on being the bearer of an urgent message for hot water, found Jane. He had been into the kitchen and found it deserted. The long table was piled with mounds of cakes and eatables and covered with a white cloth. The floor was freshly scrubbed, still damp. It looked as if some one had been working indeed.

Through the window he caught sight of Jane, wearing her apron, her sleeves rolled up, her eyes still closed, and a line of pain between her brows. He came noiselessly across the long lush grass. Standing in front of her, his hands clasped behind him, his eyes searched her face thoughtfully.

"Jane!" he said.

With a start she opened her eyes.

"Are you tired, Jane," he asked gently, "or are you dreaming?"

The long lashes showed blackly against Jane's cheeks as she answered. Her voice was a little strained. "I think it is a little of both."

Her eyes were very tender as he looked at her, then suddenly a shadow as if of some remembrance came into them. His mouth set in a grim line.

She looked up at him slowly. A faint puzzled wonder came into the grave sweetness of her grey eyes.

He had changed in some way. How and why she could not put into words. It seemed that new lines, hard lines, had come into his face, about his eyes, and his mouth had an unhappy look.

"Did you come back for anything?" The old smile, a little tremulous, came back to Jane's face and swept away the tiredness.

"For hot water," he said. He had an impulse then that might have changed the course of his life, have saved many a black and bitter day for himself and Jane Dunkley—an impulse to throw himself on her mercy, to kneel at her feet and say quite honestly, with all his soul in his words :

"I came back for you, Jane, I came because I could stay away no longer. I could not bear to think of you working, slaving in the kitchen."

But Gwen had carelessly informed him that Jane had refused to come. She preferred to stay in the house. Besides, on Thursdays, as a rule, Gwen had added with a significant smile, the red giant rode out of the east and down to Nyasha, in all the glory of his Sunday best.

So all he said, while the hunger of his heart fought against the growing recklessness and bitterness in

his eyes, was, " We had not enough hot water, Miss Dunkley."

Jane rose promptly. Her face looked tired, her eyes a little dazed as if the sun shone in them. She felt as if a strange chill wind had blown from hitherto unknown ways into her world, and had set the little half-built house in the shifting sands of dreams toppling.

CHAPTER XI.

ABOVE the murmur of the sea and the wind on the trees came the swinging lilt of music and the beat of the dancers' feet.

As yet there were none of the luxuries of the south, such as string bands and orchestras. The folk of Nyasha were limited to the old, white-haired fiddler, or a lad merrily playing a concertina, and were quite content as long as they kept perfect time.

So the piano-players of the gathering took it in turn to preside on the platform where branches of eucalyptus and the glory of yellow and scarlet sorrel hid the weather-blistered wood of the ancient piano, that had been dug out of the dim recesses of the council hall.

The piano, in its bower of greenery, held place of honour in the centre of the raised platform. On either side towards the footlights, provided by six oil lamps set in a row and punctuated with tins of scarlet sorrel, sat the old fiddler and the concertina-player. Sometimes a genius with a mouth-organ chimed in, or took the place of the latter, while he

danced. The dance began with a few preliminary musical skirmishes from the musical trio. The old, white-headed fiddler, his bald head bent, tuned up the yellow violin that was of more sentimental value to him than a Stradivarius.

The red-faced, sandy-haired youth drew the concertina out in a long, protesting note, followed by a few blood-curdling quirks ; the proud and perspiring owner of the mouth-organ would clamber up on to the platform, knocking over a few unnecessary plants in the way, and drawing the back of his hand across his mouth, and his coat-sleeve across the mouth-organ, shakily produce a bar or two.

The girls of the district sat on seats around the hall, arrayed in the gorgeous best that a limited wardrobe provided. What they lacked in the latest creations from Paris they supplied in their contribution to the colour scheme. Joseph in his coat of many colours was not arrayed more gorgeously than these. The men gathered in groups near the door, hanging back and furtively eyeing the wall seats with their feminine occupants. They wore ordinary walking suits, with the subtle difference, however, of a white shirt and a new black or coloured tie ; slippers with a bow completed the scheme of decoration.

The red giant was M.C. He stood, a large but lonely figure in the polished oasis of floor, and at the first note of the tuning-up process called aloud, in a terrible voice, on the young men of the community.

“ Lancers ! Select partners.”

The groups of men broke cover, galvanised into activity. They scurried across the slippery floor to a partner with a readiness that gave one the suspicion that their eyes had for some time been glued in that particular direction. They bowed in a manner not to be outdone by the most Parisian of Parisians. The girls all feigned surprise, blushed and murmured in sinking voices, "With pleasure."

"Couples parade," said the voice.

The girls rose promptly, and took the arm of their partners.

"March."

Two by two they began a slow, swaying progress around the hall. A buzz of voices arose and fell, the tinkle of the girlish laughter and the deeper bray of the men.

On the seats, a few girls—who found there were not enough men to go round, in that one or two men still lingered uncertainly at the door, eyeing the polished floor as if afraid to trust its slippery surface—whispered to each other or professed interest in the musicians, looking anywhere but at the dancers.

The red giant looked at the girls on the wall benches, and then at the men by the door. He appeared to be rapidly doing a sum of mental arithmetic.

A cold eye of inquiry flashed in the direction of the door, where a small group lounged undecidedly. Under the cold eye they appeared to wilt and weaken at the knees. They began hurriedly rather contradictory remarks on the weather. The red

giant strode towards them. Jane, at the piano, turning the music gravely, a white figure in the decorative shrubbery, heard Gwen's soft, amused laugh near.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw her standing with Lionel Warde, her arm within his. They were both smiling, and looking down towards the wide door, where an excited colloquy, in the audience style known as an Irishman's whisper, was taking place.

They, it appeared, had not been introduced. Some of them were not sure if they could dance at all.

The red giant disintegrated himself from the group. He began to walk in the direction of the girls who sat on the benches. There was obvious fluttering, smoothing of hair and patting of frocks, little queer smiles in that fluttered dovecot. Behind the red giant a small and sheepish procession followed, making slow and slippery progress across the yellow mirror of the floor.

In less than three minutes the matter was adjusted. The two groups were introduced, and coupled, and placed themselves here and there in the circling parade.

The giant looked at Jane and nodded. She struck a loud arresting chord.

"Form places." The voice dominated everything. Gwen giggled. She pressed Warde's arm to draw his attention to a wonderful sample of the local dress-maker's art that evidently threatened to send her into hysterics.

Her own dress stood out by its cut and style from

anything in the room. It was low at the neck and showed her white throat. The tiny sleeves down to her elbow were of transparent net, and through it her rounded arms gleamed whitely. A silver iridescent butterfly on a gold hair comb quivered in her hair as she moved.

The majority of the other girls wore their dresses high to the throat, with a tiny square of V-shaped yoke, and short sleeves that were sternly lined.

The giant nodded solemnly to Jane, and to the violinist, the concertinist, and the mouth-organist.

He raised his hand. The old fiddler lifted his bow. The god of the concertina settled himself firmly on his throne of a wooden kerosene box covered with some green material that by its brilliance was very surely a relic from the St. Patrick's Day festivities.

The sandy-haired youth moistened his lips, raised the mouth-organ and waited, his eye fixed hypnotically on the galvanised iron roof. The breath of suspense hovered over the gathering. Then :

“ Salute partners.”

With a crashing chord at the piano, a wild, delirious medley of sound from the primitive orchestra and a command ringing above all else, the dance started. Miss Gwendoline Hermione Maud Dunkley's ball had begun. Laughter and life and youth swung by the central platform where Jane played, a joyous, happy chorus. The lilting music rose and fell under the magic of the long, slim

fingers, floated out to a night that a half-rising moon flooded with silver.

Gwendoline Hermione Maud and her partner swung lightly by. Jane heard her voice, a little breathless with exertion, a trifle affected in its languid accent. Gwendoline laughed often. Jane, without turning, knew by the light tinkling of laughter when Gwen went by.

A waltz came next, and Jane saw that they, Warde and Gwendoline, were still partners.

She waited at the piano for the word of command to begin, feeling suddenly old and out of it all. All the gathering weariness seemed to seize her as she sat there, her hands idle in her lap, her eyes unseeing on the music before her.

She was too tired even to think, said poor Jane to herself. Then suddenly and magically all her weariness flew away.

"Jane," said Warde beside her, a little breathlessly, "what dances are you going to give me?"

Her heart danced again. Jane, at that time, in spite of her womanliness, had so much of a child in her composition.

"Oh," she said, "but I hadn't meant to dance at all."

"But you can dance, Jane?"

"Yes." She lifted her eyes shyly and flushed. "At least they say I can waltz."

"Well." He was rapidly scribbling on his cuff. Nyasha had not risen yet to the use of any other than a mental programme or a shirt-cuff and a pencil for the engagements.

"The waltz after this . . . the next waltz, and let me see, yes, the supper waltz. I kept that reserved for you."

Jane's long lashes drooped suddenly and her eyes.

"Not the supper dance, I am sorry"; then, hesitatingly, "I had promised that to Mr. Smith."

Warde looked at her. He straightened himself and became aware that the dancers were waiting.

"Thank you for the others," he said. There was a cold, inexplicable note in his voice. In another minute he had clambered down the glowing mass of red geraniums into the body of the hall.

A second and then the strains of the waltz stole out, and throbbed in the long room. Jane played this time from memory, her eyes on the whirling drift of colour that swayed languorously by her.

She saw them all as they swayed past, but out of all the crowd only the vision of two people remained, Gwen with her hair shining like gold and the silver butterfly nodding coquettishly and dancing high on its shell comb, her silk gown of pale exquisite pink with the soft delicate laces at elbow and breast, the wistful envy in her airy garb of all the other girlish eyes. That was just as Gwendoline would have wished it to be. By the proud tilt of her little head, of her rounded chin, Jane was very sure of that.

Warde was smiling down at the golden fluffy head

against his breast as they passed, listening to something the girl was saying, in a teasing reproach.

"And to think that you didn't want to come, that I had to coax you so. Whatever strange idea had you in mind when you said to me that you were unworthy?"

"It is true," he said. A shadow came over his face, and into his eyes. Gwendoline laughed lightly. She swayed to him in the waltz. "As if," she said, "I—we," she corrected herself, flushing prettily, "as if we ever once thought of the position, or want of position. I understand, though you never speak of it, that it is only temporary."

"It may be for ever," he said. Into his mind a thought swept suddenly. He did not know that it was in the mind of Gwendoline also, lurking under all her laughter.

She was thinking, as he, of the letter and papers that had come by the mail that afternoon. The mail coach had swung into Nyasha after five o'clock. Jane had sent over to the hall the letter and papers that had come for Lionel Warde. Old Elzar the messenger had added that there were several papers also.

He had been helping Gwendoline with the decorations to the roof rafter at the time, perched high up on a ladder. Gwen had taken the letter from Elzar and had handed it up to him. On the back was stamped heavily in black a small coronet.

Warde had not read the letter then, as, with curiosity, she had hoped. He had glanced carelessly at the handwriting, then put it unopened in his pocket.

"I'll give you permission to read your mail," Gwendoline had said. "I'll even go away in a corner so that you may devour it in silence."

He had laughed carelessly. "It can wait. I know before I open it there is nothing much in it. It is from an old lady I was very fond of. It will probably contain a lecture."

"And the old lady has a coronet," Gwendoline had said to herself. He thought with a pang of compunction and a sense of shame, how charming Gwendoline Dunkley was to him, how friendly. He wondered what she would think, if the sweetness of her manner towards him would change if she knew—

He flung the thought aside. Nothing black and sinister should enter here, he told himself roughly.

When the waltz ended and the dancers grouped together and chatted or drifted into the refreshment-room where Mrs. Dunkley and a few of the elder ladies presided, he saw Jane come down the steps of the platform.

Jane was not dressed for the ball, dressed, that is, in the brightness of any colour or especial ornamentation. Her concession to the occasion was a thin pair of satin shoes. Her white dress was of muslin, open sailor fashion at the throat, with a tiny bunch of soft lace.

There was no colour about her save her hair, which shone redly as she moved under the swaying lights, suspended from the rafters above—Bernard Smith came forward to meet her. Warde saw Jane smile. Smith said something. He broke off a piece of red

geranium that bloomed by him and offered it to Jane.

Warde, watching, saw that Jane, with barely perceptible hesitation, took it. She pinned it at her breast.

CHAPTER XII.

"JANE, will you marry me?"

"No," said Jane promptly, and the grey sweetness of her eyes lifted to his face and rested there frankly. But he saw that in her lap her clasped hands trembled.

"Why not, Jane?" For a big man, and in comparison to its power of less than twenty minutes ago, his voice was strangely gentle. His red face paled a little. "Why not?"

She looked down at the floor. Her hands were still now, but her slim foot in its casing of beaded black satin tapped nervously on the polished surface.

"Oh! there are ever so many reasons." She avoided the inquiry of his honest eyes. "Who would look after the stores? I could not leave my father—and—well, I'm not sure that I ever want to marry."

"These are all difficulties that are very easily surmounted." His keen glance searched her downcast face, pale and a little weary in the shadow of her

heavy, drooping hair. " You have been a slave too long to the selfishness of your family, Jane. You have put your shoulders to the wheel with the courage of a man, but without a man's strength. Do you think I have not noticed the change in you of late ? "

The red flamed in her cheeks. She said, still studiously avoiding his eye, " In what way, Barney ? "

He leaned forward. There was no one quite near. Most of the dancers were crowding into the supper-room beyond. " In many ways, Jane. Your moods alternate so. Sometimes you have been very pale and quiet, sometimes feverishly brilliant. I have watched you when you thought I was not looking."

The colour had gone from her cheeks. She tried to laugh it off and in a measure succeeded. " And the deduction, Barney ? Is it the symptoms of low fever ? Give me your diagnosis."

He laughed. In his earlier youth, the father of Bernard Smith had decided on his son's career. Bernard had decided on the land. But he went to the university, and after he had been ploughed badly in his last two exams, for want of inclination as much as want of study, Smith Senior had given in to the inevitable. Barney went on the land.

" I think you are very run down," he said, and then broke into sudden passion. " Why should you work so hard, Jane ? Why not have a holiday always when Gwen comes home ? She is utterly selfish, lazy——"

" Don't, Barney. It does not do any good. I

don't mind, really. You see, I'm the Cinderella of the family, Plain Jane."

He found her laugh a little pitiful. He had a longing to take her in his great arms and hold her close, make the pathway smooth for her feet, magically take away the work stains from her hands.

" You are never plain to me, Jane." His voice was full of a protecting tenderness. " And you are not really plain at all. There is beauty in your eyes, in the turn of your head——"

" Especially when I turn it quite away," she said lightly. She laughed. Warde, standing with two or three men near the door of the supper-room, discussing the coming shell season and its prospects, heard Jane's laugh. Glancing in her direction, and seeing Smith leaning forward, he had a sudden wild and unreasoning desire to rush forward and smite that face with its cheerful mop of red hair.

" There's no comparison between Gwen and you," Smith was saying. " Gwen is a fair-weather girl. The wind and rain would strip half her looks from her. Presto! and it would be good-bye to the curly hair and the delicate rose of the cheeks. . . ." He swept away from the topic of Gwendoline Hermione Maud. " Jane, the house is nearly ready. I am having it built and furnished, made into the best house on the whole of Nyasha, because I hoped and believed that some day you would step over its threshold as mistress."

She did not answer. She leant back against the wall, and her face looked very tired in the light from the lamps overhead.

"And there will be a great garden some day, all kinds of flowers," he went on enthusiastically. "There will be English phlox and roses and beyond the garden, where the land runs into a point to the sea, some peacocks that a chum of mine is going to send me over from India. And there will be great fields of growing swaying wheat on the hillside——"

"And then there will come a drought," Jane said teasingly, a little harshly, as if she were deeply moved; "and the wheat will wither in the sheaf and the phlox die and the standard roses be eaten by a plague of garden-bugs; and the gulls will sweep in from the cliffs and peck the peacocks."

"What a gloomy seer you have become, Jane!" He smiled now. "There is not likely to be a drought in Nyasha, and if one does come, my corner of the earth is irrigated and the canals ready. And what will the phlox die of if there is no want of water? If the garden bugs come within a mile of the place they can be exterminated. And the sea-gulls are much more likely to be scared by the peacocks——"

She looked up at him with a quick smile. "Barney, you're a dear. What a husband you will make—for some other woman."

"There will never be any other woman, Jane, but you." His earnestness pierced through her raillery, the cloak of merriment that she had donned in order to lead him away from the subject.

"I am sorry, Barney." She looked at him steadily. "You have been a good friend to me. I always want to feel that you are a friend, if ever I need you."

"And you don't need me now, Jane?"

She was silent for a while. "Not in that way," she said slowly. "Maybe, I shall never marry, Barney. I never think of it."

"As long as there is no one else," he began, and then stopped suddenly, for a startled light came into Jane's eyes and passed; but he had seen. His face whitened.

He drew himself erect with a half-stifled sigh. His voice was a little husky. "Is there some one else?"

Jane was silent, looking away from him. She was watching, as if with interest, the old fiddler clambering into his place. A girl in blue was at the piano turning over the music, and raising the piano-stool to her requirements. At her side Smith repeated the question.

"No," said Jane. Her lips quivered, but her voice was steady. The crowd began to stream slowly out of the supper-room. She rose. The moment passed and seemed to Bernard Smith to leave him on the outside of the door of Jane's mind. "How about supper?" she was saying practically.

They went in together and joined the second Mrs. Dunkley and Silas at one end of the now deserted tables. In the hall beyond, the girl in blue sounded a note on the piano for the violinist. The discordant tuning-up process began.

"Gwen might have asked everybody while she was at it," Mrs. Dunkley was saying petulantly. "There are several people in Nyasha who are bound to be offended over not being asked to the ball."

"It doesn't matter really, mater," Gwen answered carelessly, moving off towards the ballroom. "Besides, you should be glad that you have had only twenty couples to greet. You know you detest shaking hands with the people of Nyasha."

"That's all very well," protested her mother. "You know that it is very likely your father may be asked to stand for Parliament as representing this district. One must remember that one is shaking hands with a vote."

Silas grunted something unintelligible and helped himself to supper. Smith waited upon Jane, and brought her coffee.

"How about the next waltz, Jane? Did you know that we sat the supper dance out? I must have the next waltz."

Jane shook her head. "I'm engaged." She lifted the coffee to her lips and drank it slowly.

"Engaged for it?" He was frankly disappointed. "Who is your partner, Jane?"

"Mr. Warde," she said. "I suppose he will be coming in for me any minute."

"Mr. Warde," he frowned, wrinkling his brows as if something were in his thoughts.

"I wish, Jane, that you wouldn't dance with Warde." He dropped his voice. "I meant to speak to him about coming to the house so often. Of course, he is paying attentions to Gwen, and she is frankly encouraging them."

She started and put her cup down suddenly. If he had looked at Jane then he would have seen that her face was whiter than the cloth on the table.

"Yes, I wish you wouldn't dance with him," he said again.

He was tapping absently with his spoon, thinking of the night when he had passed homewards along the shorter route that for a mile ran level with the beach, of the passing glimpse of Talumeni, the half-caste, in the arms of Lionel Warde.

Some day, he told himself, Jane was to be his wife. She would change her mind in days to come, when she saw that his love never wavered, when she grew tired also of the manifold duties of the stores, or when Dunkley sold out, as his wife wished, and went in for politics, and instead of sugar dealt out views over the parliamentary counter. He did not like to think of Jane, with her pure, pale face, dancing in the intimacy of the waltz with young Warde, with a man who, on the path by the sea, a little over a week ago, had held a half-caste in his arms. Bernard Smith's views were the straight, narrow but clean-cut views of his Methodist father. There was neither deviation from, nor pretence about, the straight road of his thoughts.

"Whatever do you mean?" Jane asked. Her voice had in it a note of perplexity. It sounded a little cold. She smiled at him. "Why should I not dance with him, Barney?"

He hesitated. He was not the kind of man, as a rule, to discuss other people's failings. But Jane was Jane. Some day he believed and hoped that Jane would sit on his hearth. When you told Jane Dunkley anything, you knew it went no farther. Therefore quite straightforwardly he told her:

"Because I think he has an *affaire de cœur* with Talumeni Blackham," said he.

For a little while Jane did not speak. In the hall the girl in blue was playing an old-fashioned schottische with an emphatic emphasis on the first note of each bar. Silas Dunkley and his wife had joined the dancers. Save for the natives washing up the cups and saucers at the end of the supper-room, Jane Dunkley and he were alone.

Jane suddenly turned to him and laughed. Her laughter had a queer, empty sound. She laid her hand on his arm.

"Why do you make a jest about such a thing, Barney? I almost believed it for the moment. I forget that you had often played a jest on me. Not quite like that, but still——"

"It is not jest, Jane. It is quite true."

She dropped her hand from his sleeve.

"But there are often rumours that have no foundation in truth."

"I saw them with my own eyes, Jane. Until then I had no idea of anything deeper than mere acquaintanceship between them."

Jane's eyes were dazed. She was crunching some cake in the white cloth before her, the tips of her fingers rolling the crumbs into a succession of miniature circles. Elzar came up to the table for more dishes, gathering them in a clattering confusion of sound. Jane watched the plump figure of the old native servant with a dazed questioning gaze that saw neither Elzar nor anything else in the room.

"You saw them?" she asked.

"Yes," said Bernard Smith.

He began to tell how it happened, on a day when he had been returning home from the stores. He had been talking to Jane in the post-office and had lingered too late, if she remembered.

Yes, Jane remembered. She was still looking at Elzar, gathering the dishes together at the far end of the table ; her hands still mechanically rolled the crumbs into a succession of circles.

"She was in his arms when I saw them," added Smith ; "they were standing in that ti-tree path that runs nearly the whole length of the coastline on that side. Very few people go as far out of the township, but they did not see me. I saw him kiss Talumeni."

"You saw him kiss her," she said. Her voice seemed to break on the last word, but when he turned to her quickly, he saw that her face was quite quiet. No emotion stirred it. No wave of colour disturbed its pallor.

She only looked very tired, suddenly worn : so weary that her face was robbed for the moment of all its girlishness. The long lashes lay heavily and darkly on her cheeks as she began to gather the crumbs neatly together in a pile, which she lifted on to a plate near.

"How tired you look, Jane," said Smith. Something in her face gripped him by the heart.

Jane seemed not to hear him. Her face was turned now towards the wide door that separated the two rooms. Great clusters of golden wattle framed it on either side. In the space between, the

dancers flashed past. The music rose and fell. The girl at the piano began to play slower, and the couples to dance to their places.

The music ceased with a clash of chords at the piano, a long high note from the bush orchestra. The schottische had ended.

The M.C. who had temporarily taken Bernard Smith's place called cheerily.

"The next will be the 'Blue Danube' waltz. Interval of a few minutes."

Jane rose quietly to her feet. The red geranium at her breast moved with the heaving of her body, but the pale face was still quiet.

"Come," she said, and they went into the ball-room together. Her slight limp, usually not to be observed, was noticeable.

"You will give me a waltz, Jane, if you are not too tired."

She hesitated. "I do not think I shall dance at all, Barney."

A man's figure separated itself out of the lounging, chattering crowd and came towards them; Smith had his back turned, and he did not see Warde approaching. Jane did not seem to see him either. She said, "I will dance with you after all, Barney. The waltz I was to have given to Mr. Warde I shall not dance at all, but the next, I think it will be the last of the evening, you may have that if you care to." The colour had come back to her cheeks. She smiled at him and said, "Go now. They are calling for you."

He left her seated there. A moment later he swung into the waltz with another partner, and looked

towards the door where Jane had been sitting. She was not there.

Jane, with a wild, inexplicable desire of flight, had gone into the supper-room, and there Warde, following quickly, found her. He went straight over to her, amid the pile of boxes and surplus wattle branches ; Jane was apparently seeking for something.

" Were you running away from me, Jane ? " He laughed. His eyes were bright and eager. " Had you forgotten this is our dance ? "

" I had not forgotten." Her voice filled him with uneasiness. There was a cold, hard note in it that he had never heard.

" I am sorry," he said gently. " I ought to have seen how tired you look. May I sit down ? "

She looked up at him with a thin, fleeting smile, and after a second's hesitation sat down. Her delicate face, which she had turned towards the wide doorway, wore a pallor and weariness which caught at his very heart-strings. He felt as if he had met some one else in the guise of Jane. Her mouth no longer smiled. It was set deeply in an enduring line. There was a pride in the way she held her head with its burnished weight of hair that he had never more than glimpsed before. Over all, on her face, in the pose of her slim body, was a weariness.

" Tired ? " he asked in a low voice, through which something deep and tender throbbed.

She moved her head negatively. " No," she said.

" Then there is something that is making you unhappy," he insisted.

" What should make me unhappy ? " she asked,

She was looking vaguely at the open doorway where the dancers whirled past.

He followed her glance there, watching also intently, inquiringly. A puzzled expression was on his face. Had she quarrelled with Smith?

All through the night he had told himself, when the music throbbed around him and wove its haunting way into his very heart, that if Jane were engaged to Smith she was certainly not in love with Smith. All through the other dances it seemed to him he had just lived for this one waltz with Jane.

He had pictured her head against his broad shoulder, the shining red-brown head, over-running with curls, that would just reach a little above his heart, the little work-worn hand in his, his arm about her, as they swayed to the lilting measure of the waltz. And now Jane and he, while the music throbbed on, sat on an upturned box, near to each other, but separated by a vague, nameless something that set them worlds apart.

A long feathery trail of wattle blossom lay across Jane's lap. She had been aimlessly breaking it off from a loose branch among the scattered pile of loose branches. One spray of it dropped over Jane's knee near Warde. Sitting bent a little forward, he played with the yellow plumes of the wattle and began to talk in a desultory fashion. Jane sat quite silent. His one aim was to cause the disappearance of the fixed look on the delicate face, the look as of one immersed in a sea of weariness and misery.

Jane had no right to look like that, he said to himself fiercely. He talked on. Now he spoke of Italy, now of the magic of the East and its colouring.

For variation he swung himself away from Nyasha. He had gone back for a half-space to his home, with Jane for a moment walking through the old place. Then suddenly he stopped and came to the knowledge with a sense of shock that Jane had never even heard one word. She was not listening.

He paused, still smoothing the soft plumed wattle ; then he dropped it suddenly, straightening his shoulders.

"Jane," he said, "what is the matter ? "

Her rather thin smile struggled for life under the stimulus of the meaning in his voice, then died suddenly. Behind them the door opened and shut and they were left alone. Through the doorway with its branches the dancers swayed past.

"Jane!" He caught at her hands His voice shook her heart strangely. For a moment she was caught in its spell.

She had let him see her love that day in the long dim kitchen ; she had been a fool, a slip of a country girl who believed in the words of men. Would she ever believe in anything or anybody again ?

Here was a man : the man who had power to make her heart beat -and her pulses thrill ; who paid attentions to her sister Gwen with her dower of beauty. He had held Talumeni, daughter of Pedro Blackham, in his arms, had kissed her. Perhaps also he had kissed Gwen. The colour rushed into Jane's face, then died as swiftly away. She went a curious dull white. She flung away with a sharp intake of her breath.

"Jane—Jane!"

"You insult me," she said. Her voice was cold,

pride rang in it. She looked at him with dry, scornful eyes. " You insult me, and not only——"

" Then—you don't care for me, Jane? You have never cared?"

He bent towards her to compel her eyes to answer the light in his.

But Jane did not turn. His hands fell to his side.

" Then it is true. You care for some one else," he said in a strange voice.

Yes, she cared for some one else, for the ideal that she had thought was he. She who had laughed at love had laid her heart at his feet to be kicked and trampled over. She did not flush nor flinch as she answered.

" It is quite true . . . I love some one else."

Blindly he had taken up the feathery spray of wattle blossom. For a long moment he seemed to be counting the delicate fragrant yellow balls on the frail finger-like stems. His lips moved, but no sound came at first.

It seemed a year afterwards that she heard him saying, " You love some one else." It came to him that in all his life he had never desired anything as much as he desired Jane. He had never cared for any living thing in the same way, or with the same intensity. It came to him as a curious thing that they two should sit so still. The music had a strange sad thread running through it. Over and over it throbbed on, finding its haunting echo in his heart. Then everything passed from him but Jane, and the grave, suffering sweetness of her eyes.

With her pale face and bronze hair she seemed to gleam out from the room with a faint, shining lustre

as of a pearl. She seemed to cast a pale shining around her.

Suddenly he felt in the dust at her feet. A black shadow that had haunted him, that Jane's presence had drawn away, came back, hovering close.

Did Jane read of it in his eyes? She had risen and stood with clenched hands and eyes that looked up at him and beyond him.

He cried, "Jane, is this the end, have you no word for me?"

"I have three," said Jane.

He stood before her waiting. Under her feet he saw that the yellow wattle was crushed and bruised.

"I have three words," repeated Jane. She said them with a passionate tremor in her voice, her lips quite white: "Go to Talumeni."

She turned then and went swiftly through the doorway. The branches of the yellow wattle shook and dipped after her passing. The thin, reedy note of the violin rose out of the music. Like a living thing of fire, it crept searingly into his heart.

He flung himself out into the night, and hid his face. For the thousand eyes of the night peered down at him. He thought that he heard a gaunt, mocking laugh, it sounded very far away. This thing Jane had done was cruel in its way. It was born out of her suffering, out of her passionate anguish and pride. There was more pride in Jane Dunkley's nature than one knew. It had laid dormant, perhaps, but at the lash had awakened to angry, passionate life.

There is much of the child in many women. There was much of the child in Jane. It was the

child in her that struck out blindly, giving back blow for blow.

With her head held high, Jane passed into the ballroom. When Bernard Smith looked again, she sat, as when he had left her, by the door.

By the side of her, a tall branch loaded with wattle draped the side and ran up over the arch above.

"As long as I live," whispered Jane drearily, "I shall hate the sight of yellow wattle."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE last lingering bars drew to a close. Gwendoline Hermione Maud's ball was ending.

The grey line of dawn was quivering and flashing away over the hills of Nyasha. Its wan, chilly breath drifted slowly into the hall. The lamps began to burn low and pale. The flowers took on a strangely faded look. They seemed suddenly to droop. The bursts of gaiety grew thin and weak. The grey light touched and aged the faces of the dancers. The dawn wind whispered in the eucalyptus.

Jane, on her father's arm, danced to the last slow beat of the waltz.

That old "Blue Danube" waltz, how much it has meant, what worlds of meaning have been hidden in it! What worlds of gladness and of sadness have been bound up in it! One's very heart throbs in it. Only once in the years afterwards could Jane Dunkley be induced to speak of that night. She said that it was only a blurred memory of a self that wore the mask of gaiety, that walked and danced apart, a self that flashed and scintillated through

the room, the light rhythm of the feet dancing on the edge of shadows.

Warde saw her once before he fled out again into the darkness.

Jane was dancing with Bernard Smith. The waltz had just begun. The colour burned in her cheeks; she laughed gaily and often. Warde watched her as she swung past him with no glance in his direction. Other girls followed in a slow, whirling procession, prettier, more daintily gowned, but somehow Jane stood out from them all.

The heavy bronze hair stood back in a wave from her forehead. Her dark eyebrows were perfectly curved. Her grey eyes, the grey eyes with their swift-playing lights and shadows, crinkled up at the corners as she laughed at something her partner was saying. A dimple came and went in the tender, resolute mouth. It was a mouth that would never be described as rosebud, the ideal of painters and poets, but it would serve for lesser and more ordinary men. It was large but strangely fascinating. There was something alluring about it when she smiled the wide, friendly smile that was so characteristic of Jane. Her white, even teeth showed, and Jane's teeth in their pearly whiteness and evenness were something to be proud of.

She had a grace of carriage, a slim grace of figure that not even the worn and ill-fitting frock, a discarded and oft-washed relic of Gwendoline's grandeur, could hide. Some one in the Dunkley family had to go without new clothes each season in order to lessen the bills. The girls were supposed to take it in turns. It had been Jane's turn for

more years than she ever thought about. Use was now second nature.

Warde watched Jane in an amazement that the sight of her smiling and on the arm of another man could make him suffer so. A wild, despairing jealousy, and a sense of the futility of it, drove him at last from the hall, and out into the night.

If Jane saw him go is not recorded. Only it came to pass that as the waltz was ending, she drooped heavily in Bernard's arms, so that he thought she was about to faint ; she drew herself quickly together as he led her to a seat, but a grey shadow seemed to drift over her face and all the colour went out of her lips.

"Shall I get you some wine, Jane ?" Smith said anxiously.

"If you would," she whispered gratefully.

He opened the window behind her and the air blew freshly in, chill with the touch of the nearing dawn. When Jane looked out she saw that far over the sea the day was beginning to break.

"But the shadow will be on the hills," whispered Jane. Her eyes shut tightly for a minute.

They opened again to find Bernard back with the wine. She drank it slowly, and then the grey light faded from her face. Very, very slowly in its place came a strain of colour. In her eyes a queer dazed light lingered.

"Dear," Bernard Smith begged in a low, stirred voice. "Don't look like that. Your face breaks my heart with its weariness ; thank God the dance is over !"

And Jane, repeating it dully, said also, "Thank God. . . . the dance is over."

At last the chattering, laughing groups by the doors broke up, and prepared for the homeward journey. They filed out of the cloak-rooms and began to walk in pairs across the grass paddock towards the township or where the buggies and patient horses were tethered.

The Dunkleys came last of all. They had remained to put out the lights carefully and lock the stores. Jane, waiting outside the hall with Bernard, shrank close to him when the last oil light flickered out and footsteps sounded in the porchway. Her face in the breaking light was drawn and white.

Four people came out to them and Jane drew a deep breath of relief. Warde was not among them.

Gwen walked with her mother. Silas Dunkley strolled on with Smith; Jane between them made no pretence of joining in the conversation.

What mattered it if there were a fine day to-morrow—if the wheat crops were promising? Jane felt in a dazed way that the shining of the morrow's sun would bring her no comfort. The final harvest of her life, when the crops were gathered, would be ruined by the red sorrel of sorrow and disillusionment.

Behind her Gwendoline's voice arose. She was always fretful and irritable when tired.

"He might have waited when it was our last night in Nyasha, even if he had to crawl home with us. The coach leaves at seven, so probably he won't be down to say good-bye even."

"But he will write, dear," Jane heard Mrs. Dunkley yawn. "I really don't think there's any use

of going to bed at all, when the coach goes so early. Thank goodness Jane has packed the boxes. Did not Warde say anything about the letter, Gwen?"

Gwendoline shrugged her shoulders crossly. "No. He never mentioned it. I don't believe he has ever read it. If a coronet wrote to me I'd have devoured the contents in a second."

A pause. Gwendoline again.

"So ridiculous to make an excuse of illness."

"But, dear, he did look ill, I thought, and he was full of apologies."

"Anyhow, he might have managed to wait. He went just when the last waltz had begun, mater."

"By the way," she dismissed for the moment the topic of Warde—"apropos of Jane's brief for Talumeni, did you see Talumeni to-night?"

Ahead of them Jane stumbled a little over the short grass.

"Talumeni? no; what was she doing?"

"Looking in at one of the windows. I saw her once making extraordinary gestures and beckoning to some one or other in the room, mater. I drew Lionel Warde's attention to it at the time. She had disappeared when we looked again, however."

Jane drew a sharp breath. She seemed to find the grassy plot of land over which she moved towards the house, very rough to her feet.

"Those thin slippers, don't make the best of footgear for unfashionable folk like us, eh, Jane?" her father observed cheerfully, holding out a ready arm as she stumbled.

"And what did he say, Gwen?"

How Jane wished they would keep silence for a few

moments, a few moments in which she could reach the sanctuary of her room. There was work to be done before the crowd came in, those preparations for the early departure southwards to the nearest harbour town ; but if she could only reach her room for one minute—one minute of silence. She leaned heavily on her father's arm and he put his arm about her with rough tenderness.

"Used up, old girl ?" he said kindly.

"I can't remember, mater." Gwendoline was answering her mother's last question carelessly. "I think he avoided any reference to it. Men are queer folk, in matters like that, especially Englishmen. Truth to tell, I found him rather boring to-night."

"Talumeni seems to have forgotten all the training the college gave her," Mrs. Dunkley said musingly. She yawned. "Pedro seems to let her run wild, which reminds me that I thought I saw her, just before the ball ended, talking to some one in the clearing not far from the hall ; some young fellows are so foolish. I have always said," she ended outspokenly, "that there would be trouble over Talumeni Blackham, the way she was brought up. My eyesight isn't as good as it was or I might have seen whom she was talking to. Anyhow, they were apparently making love to each other."

Jane seemed to stumble again, and made a vain effort to recover. With a little gasp she seemed to swing loosely out from her father's arm, her hand to her throat. In another second before either man could catch her she was lying, a white inert heap on the grass, very silent.

"Jane!" Mrs. Dunkley flung up her arms and screamed hysterically. She never remembered having seen Jane faint before—but the silent doubled-up heap of whiteness that was Jane, made no answer.

For the first time in her life Jane was not there at the call of need. The blissful gift of silence for which she had so passionately craved was given to her.

In the early coach the next morning the second Mrs. Dunkley, speeding on her way eastward to the coast where the southward steamers waited, said fretfully and vaguely, that, "It was just what you could expect of Jane."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE fire was dead, a few burnt and charred sticks in a mound of ashes. In the dawn wind the loose flap of the tent fluttered with an odd, empty sound. The grey light began to creep, Sioux fashion, out from the shadows of the hill.

At Warde's feet, far below, lay the faintly glimmering roofs of Nyasha and the dark huts of the native quarter, black and silent against the slow gathering light.

A second's silence, and then, after a flapping of wings, a cock crowed a throaty chorus that went round in a circle of sound.

The pale glimmering band of light on the horizon broadened. Over the cliffs the gulls circled and wheeled. Warde watched them dip and balance, then sweep outwards as if to the grey breaking of dawn. The cries floated back to him, and the magpies in the dark trees drowned the lingering harshness with a flood of melody. Warde stared stupidly down at the opened letter in his hand, then across the desert, still dark, the pines black in the

distance. A group of camels were moving slowly ; on the desert road the white tilt of the waggon behind them showed faintly.

He opened the letter again, but it seemed to convey no meaning for the moment. There was a dull, throbbing pain of which he seemed the centre. He read the letter aloud, while in the damp wet grass around him the cicadas shrilled their monotonous accompaniment. It was so far away—remote, this place from which the letter came. It was outside the circle of his life. These things had gone from him, they had no part or parcel in his life now.

“ Dear Lionel,” the letter began, “ an old, interfering lady, who took much interest in you, for many reasons that matter little now, when all is said ; this old and interfering busybody of a woman will have written her last letter to anyone. Because I, the old busybody, am stricken with a mortal illness, I am writing to you, prying into your affairs again. Perhaps you will have time to answer me, who knows ? I think I should like to live long enough to hear from you, Lionel Warde. There was another Lionel Warde once—but, as Kipling says, that is another story. I want to know when you are coming back to England ? You will see by the papers that accompany this letter, that two things of some moment to you have happened. Will you forgive me for putting that last which comes first to you, Lionel ? To begin, your uncle died quietly in his sleep two weeks ago. There is already a rumour that his wife is returning to the stage. I can’t guarantee its truth, but I do know that for the last two years she has wanted to.

“ Rumour says the baby has been sickly for months.

It is a puny, white-faced, little thing, that looks as if its tiny feet were set to the road that I, nearing seventy, am taking. Yet it may live to be an old man. Life is a strange and a persistent thing, so when I have passed away, you will find that I have left you a small gift which may be of some use to you. Because I ought to have been your mother, Lionel, only for matchmaking people who decided otherwise, when I was very young and thoughtless. I say to you now, two things. The first is, that I hope you will bring to England, to share my gift to you, some dear girl, who will like old-fashioned things well enough to endure their presence. . . . ”

He put one hand over his brow wearily. It was all vague and meaningless. Lady Anne of Deerwood had always been vague in her letters. His dully aching mind was in no condition to solve the problem. Lady Anne had bequeathed to him some gift, something maybe that had been dear to her.

Memory brought him a half-forgotten vision of the great town house crowded with curios and wondrous old things. She had a country mansion too, that, towering on a hill by the sea, looked over a village and a wide expanse of country. He had played there as a boy on different occasions, had gone there for holidays when he was older. He could see her leaning on a stick, her bright bird-like old eyes watching him. Those eyes had always looked kindly on Lionel Warde ; the wily, dreaded tongue, with its barbed shafts, had never turned on him. She had left him perhaps that quaint old *escritoire* with its carved legs, that had always fascinated him by its

very ugliness. She had always said, with a laugh, that some day it would be his.

For a moment a longing swept over him to see her again. She had been all the mother he had ever known. He went back to the old home where he had lived with his uncle since his father's death ; the grim, selfish uncle who was so often away, and who, a few years ago, had unexpectedly brought home a bride to a shocked county, who believed that on the stage and out of the peerage there was no redemption.

"Secondly," the letter went on, "you will see in the same column as the notice of your uncle's death, that of the sardine man, Sir Julian Wright, so Muriel Cartwright is a widow, a golden flirtatious widow adorned with yards of black crape. I think she will wear black a long while. It suits her so well."

The letter ended with the abruptness and grimness that had always characterised old Lady Anne of Deerwood.

"I hope you will have forgotten her. I hope you will never marry her. I have always hated her."

Richard Warde was dead. Muriel was a widow.

The two facts pierced against the dull throbbing of his brain, blunted themselves there. They were all far-off things, things that had no meaning. They did not pierce into his inner consciousness. They meant nothing.

He did not even open the newspapers. If he had he would have seen the announcement.

" . . . Richard, sixth Earl of Mountshields, aged seventy-five," and lower down : "The new heir to the title is a baby of three years at present seriously ill. Next in succession to the Earldom of

Mountshields is the Honourable Lionel Warde, who is believed to be in Australia."

If he had seen these things at this time, they would have brought little meaning to him. The three years since he had left the shores of the old homeland, had swept him into wide ways, into less narrow grooves of thought. Since then, he had been brought face to face with life and its many lessons. The wide free spaces, the broadening sense of equality among men, had swept from him all traces of snobbery he had ever possessed.

He saw himself, in the true perspective of nature, as a tiny pygmy in a lone island, a black dot in a world of millions of other black dots. Here and there the dots grouped together until they seemed merged into one, and men spoke arrogantly of civilisation, of progress and of great cities. Here and there the groups were smaller, wide apart, in isolated places, pioneers, with the great forces of nature about them, and men spoke and called the things primitive and rough and rude. One and all of these black dots were part of the whole mysterious thing that was called life. He felt as one destined apart from it all, an isolated soul fated to walk always alone. When he had flung out his hands, asking some gift, life, it seemed, had always given him the same answer. Life had placed in his outstretched palms a gift that seemed glorious in its first blossoming. When eagerly he bent to it, he saw that its promise was mockery, a thing that withered, that crumbled always at his touch, dust of Dead-Sea Fruit in his hands.

He would ask life for no more, he cried out passion-

ately, to the breaking dawn. The faint pearl hue, blending delicately into the rose, with a faint golden flame beginning to flicker on the iridescent edge of the horizon, brought now no hope, nor caught at his heart any longer. He had only the dust of hope and love in his hands. When he flung that from him he was empty-handed, empty-hearted, because it was of the dust, and he as less than the dust.

The golden tongues of flame grew above the horizon, curled upwards with uncertain flickerings as if, far below, a wind blew through the unseen fire. The deep emerald of the willows of Nyasha, broke suddenly into brilliance. The rustling pines bent their tall dark heads to the god of dawn, the white boled gum-trees flung themselves sheerly and starkly against the lifting mist of the brown desert and the great ink-black bulk of the mountains. The wind stirred in the wiry tussocks. The cliffs broke across the shimmer of the sea. He, in the face of the majesty of nature, in the fresh glory of the dawn, was as naught, a black dot in a world of millions of aimless black dots. He was face to face at last with his fate.

Bitterly he said that over and over. It was no use fighting against one's fate, against the heartbreaking destiny of loneliness and failure. Fate dogged a man mercilessly, until he was down and out ; flung him down, battered him if he strove to rise.

To Lionel Warde, sitting there, the world was full of dead laughter, of mocking voices ; they followed him into the tent, those mocking ghosts, jeering and pointing. Their peal of empty laughter echoed when he thought of old ambitions, of his ideals of women.

Jane, with her honest, fearless eyes, Jane, who in spite of everything, had stood out from all other women, the one woman who would surely keep faith, had been as untrue as the rest. That frankness, that impulsiveness, that softness of her eyes that day in the old dim kitchen, had all been a mask a woman can so easily don. Jane had played with him, laughed with him. Last night, flinging him aside, she had laughed and said words to him that still burned in his brain.

"Go to Talumeni! Go to Talumeni!" Jane's voice it seemed at first, then a ghostly, jeering chorus of voices. Two or three minutes passed, and the voices clamoured on. With a movement of passion, he bent under the crushing load of thoughts, flung to his feet, hands clenched at his side, his face livid. Well, he would go to Talumeni. Talumeni, at least, out of all the world, loved him. If her skin was dark, the heart and the soul of her were white.

Her whimpering last night when he had passionately bid her begone, came back to him now. It was in the very air, it seemed at the very door of the tent.

He tore back the flap and stepped outside, his face white with the despairing burden of thoughts, and with the sleepless night.

The whimpering went on and on, the whimpering of the downward dawn wind sobbing through the dark, leaning pines. It brought back the voice of Talumeni, the pleading, tempting, whispering voice.

He turned abruptly down the path, his back to the township of Nyasha. The red glow of the sunrise flamed on the roof of Dunkley's Stores, in the peace of the long, narrow garden.

He did not see it. As he swung down towards the

sea he saw Pedro Blackham climbing the path. When Pedro saw him, he stopped climbing and waited. Warde could see the dark sullenness of his heavy face, the cunning brows.

Below on the road, the mail-coach swung past, on its way towards the thin, dark stem of land, where the boats waited at the quay and then swung southward.

A white handkerchief fluttered, then was gone, as the coach abruptly turned. Pedro Blackham, on the path, smiled cynically as he waited.

It was near the sunrise of another day when Lionel Warde, with bloodshot eyes, stumbled along the uneven pathway. He reeled as he walked, and swayed awkwardly as he reached the tent. Then the flap fell to behind him.

For an hour the sharp pricks of conscience and shame pierced him, while the stupefying fumes of drink blurred and eventually conquered. When the sun shone out again over Nyasha, in the tent on the slope a man lay wrapped in the stupor of a drunken sleep, and in his sleep he dreamed that he was a child again, a little child stumbling along in the dark, in a world of loneliness, the sound of sobbing in his ears.

Talumeni in her room in the half-house, half-hut, yawned and stretched lazily like a young animal awakened from sleep, as the first bars of the sunlight fell through the open window; then suddenly she laughed, a little cooing, half-scornful laugh, as if at some memory, and threw out her dark hands with a childish gesture of triumph.

Hours before, Jane Dunkley, pale of face, the shadows dark under her big grey eyes, woke to the day also, struggling out of a world of troubled dreams,

elusive and vague, with the sound of far-off sobbing in her ears, that at last resolved itself into the waters of the sea, inrushing with the tide.

A tide of remembrance surged in with them, and broke over Jane's head. The grey dawn laid its chill head on her heart. "Oh," said Jane, and her voice broke pitifully, "another day to be lived through. . . ."

The tide of remembrance surged over and engulfed her again. It left Jane like a little child, sobbing among her pillows, helpless, afraid.

* * * * *

What are we, after all, but children ?

Man of us, woman of us, we are all alike.

The older we grow the clearer we realise the youth of the inner self of us.

The self that treads the ways of the world grows up, and leaves behind the days of toys, and childish falls, and belief in fairy stories. It builds a cairn of amused tolerance at the closed gate of childhood, sets proudly the first milestone of knowledge on the road.

That self is so wise, so full of knowledge. It shrugs at the last glance at the cairn by the closed gate ; strengthening its shoulders it sets out so bravely on the road, breaking all shackles. It casts its own shining glow before it, a glow that irradiates everything with rose and gold.

For a while there drift back laughter and merriment, the rose-glow gives place to the fair and flashing lights of many a Will-o'-the-wisp. By and by, the laughter that floated back so clearly at the beginning, echoes more faintly. The grass grows on the cairn, the moss creeps on the face of the first milestone.

The winds of the world drift by. He who has ears to hear, hears the murmuring chant. It stirs the dead leaves that autumn has blown back on the first step of the road.

"O, the fairy pictures that childish eyes could see,
Dome and spire and cities fair by a silver sea,
Far off castles, sunny lands, through a golden haze,
How the young feet longed to tread new, strange,
beckoning ways !

Would that we had never opened Childhood's wondrous Gate,

But once across the Threshold, an' Life calls, who may wait ?

Swift the vision fading in the passing of the years,
And the glass grew grey and misty. Is it time—or blur of tears ?

For no wondrous pictures now of silver and of gold,
In the old dream-setting, to our older eyes unfold,
But, oh, back to the Child Time we fain would pass,
Tho' Wisdom sees the visions as bits of Broken Glass."

That self of ours treads many alluring and disillusioning byways, and comes ever back to the one road on which our feet were set : the road men call Experience. There is a tortuous and dark road that runs side by side with the Road of Experience, a fenceless road, so near that they two are almost as one, and the shadow of the one falls heavily sometimes on the other.

Looking back, on the Road of Experience, we see that we have stumbled often, stumbled like little children in the nursery days, when the tender mother-hand stretched out to us, the cool kiss of the lips of

understanding rested upon the bruised forehead, and a voice said :

“ This is part of the lesson of Life—when you fall you must pick yourself up again and go on again, little son—little daughter. This is the lesson of Life : to brush away the hurt with the dust that clings to you, to look no more at the place where you fell, to look not back on the darkness, lest fear should clutch at your heart, and you stumble again. Somewhere ahead there is Light.”

We are, after all, but as children.

Our attitude towards Life, towards the dark places, towards the stumbling of our feet on the untried, unknown places, in how much has it changed in reality ?

We walk alone, as we had wished, scorning help since the time that first milestone reared itself whitely at the beginning of the way. There is no longer the hand stretched out to us. We learn not to sob at a fall, to hide our thoughts, lest the hurtling arrows of a sneering world transfix them for mockers to jeer at ; to weave, at the Loom of Silence, a garb in which to clothe and hide the Inner Self of us, and be one like to the other.

The mother-heart that might understand, may long since be dust of the dust, or, by that outer self of us be thrust on to the fenceless Road of Sorrow that runs by us.

Here and there along the road is a space of darkness where we stumble ; here and there a space of light, and when we come to the space of light, we shrug our shoulders or laugh at the dark spaces, and believe that the shining space is the beginning of a new road,

that we have finished with the Road of Experience, and that there is no more to learn.

And lo ! we stumble again, through alternating shadow and light, and so on, a little more weary now with each step, until the end.

And the need of us, deep in us, deep down where the probing eye of stranger or friend may not reach, is the need of that understanding that was once so close to us, that was a staff to our hands, a light to our feet. If we have lost the child's simple faith in Life, we have closed the door of understanding, have prisoned sympathy within, but the need is a thing, deep rooted in us, on which no door ever shuts her cynicism shutters. Cynicism at the best is a poor thing, a cloak long worn threadbare.

The need is in us ; the perfect Understanding which many creeds have striven to satisfy in the spiritual sense. Your good Protestant clings to the inspiring Brotherhood of Christ and His teachings. Your good Catholic clings to the tender, mystical Motherhood of Mary.

The lanterns of Faith have shone into many a heart, have lightened many a road.

But we are very human, and the human need lies close to the heart, the longing for one human soul to understand, to be at our side in the dark places, to share the sun in the places where light falls.

The union that gives these two things to two people is not marriage the Institution—but marriage the Sacrament. A sweetheart stands, after all, but on the edge ; a wife enters into the Interior, because through marriage there comes understanding.

Every man, who has walked on the Road of Life, in the intimacy of marriage, believes that the last seal of knowledge is set on his brow when he says, with the superiority of wisdom, "What are women, after all, but children ? "

A woman under the outer guise that she shows to the world, is a child at heart, with a child's moods, with a child's beliefs, and a child's longing.

And every woman, who has walked with a man on the Road of Life in the intimacy of marriage, has whispered to herself in the crisis that comes to every soul :

" What are men, after all, but children ? "

Every woman's husband is to her, in the secret recesses of her heart, her child, her boy. The awakened roots of her love grow deeper because of the recognition of the unspoken need, than ever the love of the wife.

Whether man or woman, each day on the Road of Life teaches us its lesson. We are wont to speak of experience as something past or over. We do not realise, that while we are on the Road of Life, we are on the Road of Experience.

It has no ending while Life itself lasts. Another road opens out from it, a road that is not of this world. Maybe the still, shining, enigmatical peace that plays about the lips of those who have taken the first step on this road, shows that there are no dark places nor lack of understanding there.

This is a long way away, you say, from three or more folk of the present story, a drifting into ever-widening circles away from them ; but if you ponder awhile, you will see that that which seems far, is in

reality near, a slow stepping, as it were, across the threshold, a striving to peep into the Interior, and to find explanation for the strange things men and women do when they might have done otherwise. All the saddest and maddest things that we do in this old world, surely arise not so much from want of thought as from the fact that there lies deep within us, every one of us, under the tamed disciplined exterior, and stirred only in the great crisis, the wild undisciplined and rebellious heart of a child.

CHAPTER XV.

ON a bright morning full of sunlight, a little wan because the last touch of winter lingered on the island, a grizzled red-bearded Scotchman, walking on the road beside a team of roan and white bullocks, that pulled a heavily-laden waggon with a white canvas cover, stopped, with many creakings and groanings of the wheels, outside Dunkley's Stores.

The bullocky, a picturesque figure in his blue shirt and rush-hat and brown moleskin trousers belted loosely at the knees, seemed to find considerable difficulty in unfastening the traces that linked the bullocks together, and in adjusting the heavy yokes. He took some time over it, swearing audibly and with apparent cheerfulness.

He came into the post-office, and found Jane Dunkley there. She was tying the strings of a holland overall neatly about her. At the first glance, coming in from the sunlight to the comparative dimness of the shop, she seemed unchanged: a little thinner maybe, but still the same Jane.

"Nice day, considering it's still winter, Jane."

"Yes. We are really on the edge of spring now," said Jane, as she had said several times already that morning. She gave her hand into the big brawny one held out to hers, and he shook it. It seemed to her that there was a touch of more than usual warmth. A line about Jane's mouth deepened almost imperceptibly.

"How are you, Sandy? There are several letters waiting for you." She went across to the rough shelves and drew out a sheaf. Standing there she began deftly to pick out his.

The light from the window fell on the still pallor of her half-averted face. McDougall frowned suddenly. Now that his eyes had grown accustomed to the change of light he saw that there were hollows in Jane Dunkley's cheeks, purple shadows under her eyes that had not been there when he had last camped in Nyasha.

Something in the attitude of her head, the thin, sensitive hands, sorting now among the bundles of newspapers, was suggestive of infinite fatigue. A puff of wind through the open window beside her, stirred her hair and ruffled the knot of white lace at her throat. He saw that Jane's face was colourless as the holland overall she wore.

It came to him suddenly that Jane Dunkley looked far from strong. The clear pallor of her face took him back all at once to many years ago, to a Scottish town where rose the smoke of many factories. He saw the face of a girl, peeping whitely out from the folds of her tartan shawl.

Jean of Airdrie had had that nameless something in her face, that sharpened outline, those faint hollows under her eyes.

Jean of Airdrie had died long ago, but it had seemed to him for one moment, as the light fell sideways on Jane Dunkley's face, that it was Jean herself, fading slowly and withering like the flowers in the black smoke of Airdrie, who stood there.

Clearing his throat suddenly, he went to the door looking out as if at the township. The dark ridge of the pines stood up against the slope. Mechanically he noted that the white tent was no longer there.

Then the story, that, fifteen miles out of Nyasha, he had wanted to thrust back into the throat of the man who carelessly told it, was true.

Jane's voice called him gently.

"Sandy," it said. "Here are all your letters. Quite a pile of them. The lassies o' Glasgow ha'e been busy."

Her attempt at the old cheerful raillyery was pitiful.

He brought a gruffness to his voice.

"Ye ken I ha'e nae time for the lassies, Jane. Never a yin is disturbin' tae old Sandy McDougall, the noo. And hoo is it with ye, Jane?" he asked kindly. "Ye're not looking sae well the day, I'm thinking."

Jane laughed, bending down among the heap of papers on the floor. With her back turned to him she began to bundle them slowly into the packing-case that served as a cupboard. "I'm very well.

We've had a stormy winter, Sandy. No doubt you've heard of it."

"O, aye," he said, and then, "The wee bit does drift occasionally down southwards. Not much, however. Nyasha is a wee world o' its ain, I'm thinkin'."

"Or out of the world altogether," said Jane. It seemed to him there was hidden meaning in her voice. She added hurriedly, still stooping over the papers, "You have been away a much longer time than usual this trip, Sandy."

"Aye." He was still standing by the counter, tapping his fingers thoughtfully on the freshly-scrubbed top. He started as if he had been thinking deeply. "Aye, lassie, I had some trouble wi' the bullocks, t'other side." West Australia to Sandy was always t'other side. He was wont to speak of the huge stretch of country as contemptuously as if Nyasha, not Australia, were the continent.

"There's always somethin' happenin' once ye cross over," he went on. He saw that Jane had drawn a breath of relief. She had finished packing the papers and had come over to the counter. The shrinking attitude, as if of fear lest he should touch on another topic fell for the moment from her.

The change in her touched McDougall as perhaps nothing else could have done. This was the ghost of Jane trying pitifully to play the part of the old, merry, laughing Jane Dunkley.

He, too, must play his part for a while. Afterwards he must ask Jane questions that he would ask no man in Nyasha.

"O, aye. 'Twas the trouble I had," he said. "First ae thing and then another. I ha'e never seen anything in a' my years like the weather—an' the mud o' the roads up tae the axles o' the wagon. Then the wee bit bullocks sickenin' an' twa o' them deein' on me. It has been a winter o' trouble indeed."

He felt distressed then, that he had said this. Unwittingly in striving to interest Jane, he had brought a shadow to her face. Instinctively he knew, though Jane Dunkley spoke no word, or made no movement, that she, too, in her heart was repeating his last sentence.

"It has been a winter o' trouble!"

The wind drifted gently in the doorway, ruffling Jane's wonderful hair. Against the leaning post and rail fence on the other side of the road a great line of flaming colour clambered and ran, the wild crimson lute-blossoms, a full month too early. The wild mignonette in the green grass gave forth its subtle fragrancy. Jane, with her elbows on the counter, and her chin resting in the cup of her palms, stared out at their flaunting glory. She seemed to have forgotten his presence.

"Weel—I'll be goin'," said McDougall, gathering up his letters and papers. He began to stow them down the neck of his shirt, in the habit of the bushman. He drew his broad leather belt tighter so that they bulged out safely over it. He began to make his way to the door.

This was the time, maybe, that the girl dreaded most. She knew the kindly, blundering ways of old Sandy McDougall as well as himself. He would go to

the door, stop on the threshold as if remembering something, and then his face, half turned to the outside world, his short-sighted eyes peering at the lintel of the door, would begin to ask questions.

Like the postscript of a woman's letter, all Sandy's news and questionings began then and there. The other was but a preparatory skirmish.

"Poor, kind old Sandy," said Jane to herself. She began to count the steps he took to the door.

One, two, three, four, five—a little slower, six, slightly uncertain, hesitating, eight—

"I see the laddie has shifted his tent, Jane." He was peering up at the pine slope in apparent surprise.

"He has been gone some time," answered Jane quietly. She did not move, but her mouth set in an enduring line.

"Weel ! Weel ! Ye don't say so ? "

Silence. McDougall was fumbling in a mind whose ideas had suddenly deserted him. The stillness in the little shop was broken by Elzar's voice at the back of the house.

"Hyar, ye lazy serpen', what foh is you goin' to sleep ? Take the bucket and draw up the water from the well."

Jane laughed, a queer, empty laugh, as if something in old Elzar's voice appealed to the old sense of humour. She laughed for quite a while.

McDougall, staring at the lintel of the door, noting critically that the white-ants were boring their way into the softwood, wished that she would not laugh quite like that.

He wrinkled his forehead, then blurted out, "Jane, I'd no be asking this o' any other i' Nyasha. Ten mile or more on the desert road this mornin', the ither-side o' the landmark o' the pines, a man frae Nyasha was tellin' me what little news there had been since I was last here."

"Yes," said Jane steadily.

"He telt me ae thing, Jane, that I'm no believin'. Mony a wee bit rumour goes about that has nae meanin' tae it." He paused, still looking at the pointed holes in the wood where the white-ants had bored their destructive way. He seemed to find difficulty in going on. After all it was Jane who helped him.

"Was it a rumour about—Mr. Warde?" That was the only pause she made then or afterwards, in the conversation of that morning or many afterwards. She seemed to be moving about the room again. He heard the flick of a duster here and there.

"Aye," for the life of him he could say no more.

The steady flick-flack of the duster went on, with Jane's light footsteps on the boarded floor.

The scent of the mignonette blew past McDougall. It seemed to fill the little shop with its early, sweet fragrance. McDougall came from the land where every second man is a poet. He had a sudden impulse, from a nature that was not impulsive, to say to her :

"Look at the wee bit mignonette, Jane, an' the promise o' the spring in it. An' the bit grass growin' ower the bare places, an' the green mantle ower the black earth where the frost has bitten sae deep. The

winter is awa' an' the bleakness o' it. The promise o' the spring will no fail ye if ye open your heart tae it."

He had a slow-moving mind. Jane said, still dusting and polishing industriously :

"What did he tell you, Sandy?"

McDougall glanced at her swiftly, but she was not looking. She was dusting by the window, her face turned to it. Perhaps she saw the mignonette, maybe its fragrance blew in her face.

He started, dropping his voice, though there was no one, save the resting bullocks placidly chewing the cud, to hear. "'Twas a wee bit rumour, an' it mentioned the name o' Talumeni Blackham. Dae ye by one chance, Jane, remember what I would be saying to ye, in this wee bit shop, some months ago?"

"Yes," said Jane. She paused from her dusting.
"Yes, I remember, Sandy."

"Aye! I said then that the lassie would be meanin' nae good tae any mon. 'Twas the evil speerit lurked i' her een if it ever lurkit anywhere."

Jane drew a sudden sharp breath.

"An' I said," he went on slowly, each word stamped its way, like a giant pestle into a mortar, into the heart of his listener. "An' I said, if ye'll remember, that she was for attractin' the attention o' Warde, an' throwin' herself in his way. I wish," he added, as if to himself, "that I had spoken my mind tae the lad. I do wish it. But I'm a mon no for interferin'."

He paused, staring before him. He said mechanically to himself that the yoke on the off-side leader

of the bullock-team looked a wee bit heavy. He would be having tae take the waggon tae the wheelwright too. The iron tyres were loosening and should be tightened before the summer. And all the while that he thought these things, the other thought hammered and pulsated its way through.

"There are some times," said Jane, "when no one can interfere, Sandy; interference doesn't do any good."

"I'm no sae sure, lassie," he answered warmly. "After all, he was but a wee bit lad, an' didna ken the ways o' the native women, or that the half-caste has the weakness of the white race, wi' none o' the virtues."

Jane opened her mouth as if to speak, then changed her mind suddenly. She seemed to draw in a deep, lingering breath of the fragrance that drifted over.

"I was fond o' the lad," continued McDougall, warming to his subject now. "I would hae done a great deal for him—he had a way wi' him, Jane."

"Yes," she said, unexpectedly.

"A way wi' him, an' the nice word. No swearin' an' cursin' when things went wrong, though nae doot he could be doin' his share. It comes natural-like to us, I'm thinkin', Jane."

Jane agreed with a far-away nod. She waited patiently. McDougall came to her for news, for the truth of rumours. He would ask of none else, not even of her father, for all his respect for him. He thought that Jane knew all, that the men grouping in the shop on mail days and other days talked of this

thing as carelessly and frankly as they talked of other matters.

This, somehow, had not happened. Jane thought that she knew why. She thought she knew one reason why, on this topic, the careless tongues were silent in front of her. Her woman's intuition served her, filled in the pauses.

They had no idea, those men that filed in and exchanged good naturedly the local gossip, how deeply the lightest word had stirred Jane's heart. They still chaffed and teased her, seemed not to notice the increasing thinness and pallor of her face. McDougall, she knew, had noted these things, but then McDougall had been away for months.

So Sandy McDougall, on his road across the desert, had been told the story. She wondered how much he had been told, if he had listened to it all, or if in his blunt Scotch way he had broken off the conversation abruptly. She could imagine him saying, "'Tis lees, I'm thinkin', and thankin' ye kindly, I'll nae be listenin' to ony mair."

There were some things he would know that she did not know ; some things she knew, maybe, that he did not know ; there might even come a list of explanations. So she waited. She seated herself on the long, low newspaper box, her hands clasped loosely in her lap and waited. The air of fatigue hung closely about her. Her eyes looked too big for the pale thin face. The shadows intensified them.

"I don't know if I'm blamin' the boy so much for the beginnin' o' it. I hae been young myself, an' the roads o' the world is no always lit up, nor warnin'

texts hung up by the roadside. A body maybe, would be no seein' if they were."

The brown head leaned back against the dark shelves. There came no word from Jane. To herself she was saying passionately: "Men always find excuse for one another, always—always. It is the woman who is blamed, just as Talumeni is blamed. Oh, God knows I hold no brief for Talumeni, but she is so young, so young."

And, strangely enough, the old puzzled Scotsman was saying :

"But the boy was young, an' there's no tellin' youth anything. . . . I could understand the beginnin' o' it, but I canna understand, Jane,"—he came close to the counter now and looked at her with puzzled eyes, "I canna understand the endin' o' it."

"But is it ended?" asked Jane in a low voice. She, too, rose. She came over to the counter and leaned against it. Her arms lay loosely along it, "Is it ended?"

"Ended—or beginning," he said tersely. "The auld days ended, an' the new an' bitter days dawnin'."

Suddenly he struck his hand on the counter, his fist clenched. His muscles worked as he looked away from the agony of her face. "I'm no saint. I'm no professin' to be one, but I'd hae seen her deid first before I'd hae merrit her."

"Married her?" said Jane, in a queer stifled voice. Her eyes opened widely. A slow terror began to grow in them, a darkness. She bent forward and laid her hand in his arm. "He'll not be marryin' her, Sandy," she began hurriedly. "I—no one ever

thought of that to marry a native girl spells ruin, it means only degradation——”

She stopped suddenly. The amazement on the old Scotsman's face gave way suddenly to a great overmastering pity. He put his big hand over that slim work-worn hand that still rested on his left arm.

“ Then—you dinna ken the whole o' it,” said McDougall slowly.

The slow terror in her eyes grew. The pupils dilated. All at once she began to shake piteously.

“ What do you mean, Sandy? What do you mean? ” It was a curious shaken voice, half cry. McDougall did the only thing possible. It was better to have the whole thing said and done with once and for all. Who would better tell the “ puir bit lassie ” than Sandy McDougall, who had often guided her toddling footsteps along this very counter, who had carried her in his arms many a time to see the team of bullocks?

He remembered her, with a pang in his heart, as the wee toddling slip o' a creature, wi' the curls blowing golden-like about her face, and the sun turnin' them red.

Behind the shop was a room, half sitting-room, half office. Turning his eyes away from the whiteness of her face, that pitiful fear in her eyes, he drew Jane into the room.

She sat there staring up at him. Her hands hung by her side in a loose, helpless way that brought a lump into the old Scotsman's throat. He wished her face did not look so white, so thin, as that of a girl, resting long since under the green grass of Airdrie, had looked. It tore his old heart.

He swallowed hard. "Jane," he said, "I don't know how I'll be tellin' the news to ye. I thought ye'd be knowin' it. 'Twas the foolish thing, but sae honourable——"

She still stared up at him, waiting. All at once he blurted it forth.

"The lad was merrit tae Talumeni last night . . . one o' the missionaries frae Java merrit them."

CHAPTER XVI.

SPRING came tripping into Nyasha, followed by a glorious pageant of colour, and for her wonderful flitting feet the gods spread magic carpets of emerald and swiftly changing medley of greens. Spring came trilling her messages as old as the hills yet always new.

The old magic of healing came with her, the soft grass to the drought-stricken and frost-bitten earth, the fern to the pool, the tall blue flags blossoming out of the reeds to the lagoon, the feathery plumes of silver to the rustling bamboos. She brought healing, too, to many a tired heart; the grasses on the graves in the old churchyards whispered the message of resurrection and of hope.

But in that first year these things passed by one soul at least in Nyasha. For one at least the glory of the spring was meaningless. For the first time in the life of Jane Dunkley these things failed her.

The wheel of the days spun slowly on. The leaden-footed months began to steal by as if they had no heart in them.

Time was a slowly-turning wheel on which Jane, like a dormouse, went mechanically round and round from dawn to night, from night to dawn.

Summer came with its increased burden of work. The dust curled up again on the long roads winding in and out of Nyasha. Teams of sweating horses, of slow-moving bullocks, their heads bent to the yoke, the loud cracking of whips and men's voices went by, or tied up outside, Dunkley's Stores.

The yellow wheat curtseyed on the undulating ground, pale in the hollows, all golden in the sunlight of the levels. The whirr of the stripper, and the red-shirted driver in the high, scooped seat under the shade of the great white umbrella of the stripper, became again familiar. The heavy waggons laden with wheat followed. They came to a standstill on the weighbridge opposite Dunkley's Stores, and if Jane were not busy she gave a hand in the weighing-in the dusty box of an office attached to the weigh-bridge.

Folk came in from the far ways of Nyasha, from over the hills with produce from the eastward, where the grain ripened readily. The streets became a busy bustle, a kaleidoscopic moving mass of farmers, men-folk and women-folk, of dust-covered buggies and waggons.

The loud bleating of sheep, the lowing of cattle driven to market, rose on the air. Out at sea the white sails of the pearl-luggers and the circling gulls were as white specks in the distance. The black line of the pier was no longer deserted. Over all the sun blazed hotly down, the heat began to shimmer over the parching desert, to curl spirally

upwards. Between the mountains and the sea, mirages came and vanished.

Jane, growing thinner and paler through that hot, busy summer, plodded on her way. She was too busy now to look at the sea, or at the dark line of the pines across the desert.

Midsummer came and went. This year the second Mrs. Dunkley and the family had elected to spend midsummer in one of the other states. There was a rumour of Gwendoline Dunkley's engagement to some one in the South.

Silas Dunkley failed a little that summer, and the work fell heavily on Jane. Helpers were scarce, and she struggled on somehow. One often found old Elzar in the post office now, and missed Jane's raillery.

Through the dusty weighbridge window Jane was only a pale blue in a faded print gown, her red-brown head bent to the scales or the record books. Folk began to say that Jane was overworked, or that she was consumptive. Jane would go, they said philosophically, like her mother. The farmers, awaiting their turn for the weighing, would sit patiently in the waggon loads, or perch on the fence near the weighbridge and discuss the events of the day. The necks of their shirts were open to the vagrant breeze, showing the sunburnt throats and chests; the big straw hats with their narrow leather bands and swaying corks circling the wide brim, were pushed on the back of their heads as they yarned. Dust mingled with the perspiration of their faces. As the heat grew, little rivulets trickled down in white irregular lines over cheeks,

red with heat, or tanned with sunburn. They dipped the cool cabbage leaf, that was worn on top of the head under the straw hats, in the trough of running water where the horses drank, ere they moved off. The waiting brought forth no grumbling. They were grateful for the shade of the weighbridge, of the clump of trees near by, content with the few minutes' chat it afforded.

Jane heard many things as she sat there. The weighbridge was like the recording room of a newspaper. The voices floated in, and often by her, without meaning. It was all part of the life of Nyasha. In all the good-natured gossip there was no touch of malice, only sometimes a frank curiosity.

She heard one man say :

" I saw young Warde this morning."

Jane, bending over the books and recording the weight of the load on the swaying bridge, went a little paler. The pen made a narrow smearing blot as it rolled from her fingers. She picked it up and wrote the figures steadily. She tore off the check and handed it through the window to the driver who waited. Her voice called :

" Next, please."

There was a dull rumbling as the waggon moved off the bridge on to the dusty metalled road beyond ; the crack of a whip, and a word as another took its place.

Jane set the heavy weights of the scale in place, and all the while she heard those impersonal voices.

" You saw him, eh ! Looks pretty seedy on it, they say ? "

"No wonder. He's drinking pretty heavily by all accounts. It's always the way when a white man marries a native woman. It's a pity the white Australian policy doesn't extend to Nyasha, and make these marriages impossible. I feel sorry for the chap."

"He brought it on himself," the other was answering carelessly. "I think Pedro made the marriage myself. He's a snake, is Pedro Blackham, that I wouldn't trust within a hundred yards of me. Talumeni, how is she looking?"

In the office, Jane dropped one of the heavy weights, and stooped to pick it up. She seemed to take a long time. When she straightened herself again, her face was flushed as from the effort of stooping. Her call sounded.

She leaned against the bench heavily as she made out the check. The dull rumbling of the waggon seemed to beat against her brain. The crack of the whip seemed to strike her in the face, to leave an ineffaceable weal of shame that all men might read.

And outside, the voices went on carelessly with many interruptions.

"Talumeni? Yes, she used to be a beauty." She heard the spurt of a match against the wooden fence post, a pause, for a preliminary puff at the pipe, then, "Coarse and untidy and fat she is now."

"They all get like that, those natives——"

Jane in the office held her left hand over her eyes as she wrote, as if to shade off the glare of the sun.

Oh, God, if the voices would only cease, if they would only cease !

"They all get like that, those natives. I always said Talumeni would, for all the white blood in her. She took more after her mother than old Pedro. She will probably get fat and coarse and shapeless ; a mound of flesh ; in a dark woman it's horrible, and she'll drink heavily—for a young girl Talumeni used to drink far too much wine—I've seen her take it often, when she was friendly with that last barmaid of Flanigan's."

"Next," said Jane's voice, and one of the voices said :

"Well, so long, old chap. It's my turn. See you later."

So the day went by, dragging all through the hot afternoon, as if its feet were weary as the heart of Jane Dunkley.

The cool, kindly dusk came at last. Still the waggons came and went, till at nine the summer light began to fail slowly. At half-past nine she closed and locked the door of the weighbridge. When she had drawn the key from the lock, she leaned heavily against the paint-blistered door for a moment.

She made her way across the road. A few waggons returning empty from the great stack of wheat at the wharf were crawling homeward. A horseman, swaying a little on his horse, cantered by, singing, with hiccoughs in place of commas.

"Molly—hic—my Irish Molly, hic,
My sweet—hic—Acushla dear, hic,
I'm fairly off my trolley, hic
When you—hic—are near."

A woman laden with parcels, and with several children clinging to her skirts, one or two of them whimpering wearily, was hurrying in the direction of a group of men discussing the weather in front of the hotel near by. She called out something shrilly, to her husband, about the lateness of the hour, and to remember that there was no moon to-night. A cloud of dust rose in the wake of a passing buggy, whirling into the township.

Some of the dust settled on Jane. The doctor in the buggy, whirling in from some call in the country, raised his hat, and called out a cheery greeting.

Jane came into the house to find Elzar setting the table for the evening meal. The harsh clanging of bars as they fell into place denoted that Silas Dunkley was closing the shop for the night. The shopmen said good night, pulling down their rolled-up shirt-sleeves and drawing on their light summer coats as they went. On the verandah, marked here and there with a white ticket, were bundles of goods to be called for by the farmers as they drove past. The stores and the post-office were shut and barred for the night.

Jane drew a deep sigh of relief.

Silas Dunkley came in to find her by the window, staring at the fading world without.

" You look very tired, Jane." He scrutinised her closely. The air of fatigue hung about her heavily. It could no longer be hidden by Jane's bravery. He came across to her and put his arm about her shoulders. " This won't do, old girl." There was quick alarm in his voice. " I can't have you doing

the weighbridge as well as practically everything else in the place. I'll have to get a man somewhere. It's a man's work, Jane. You're not looking your old self, by a long way."

"It is only the summer," said Jane. She leaned against him a moment in silence. "And you know we can't get a man, dad. You need a rest more than I do. Anyhow, we'll have to make the best of it. I'll have to pull through somehow." That was Jane's attitude through all things lately. The world went on as usual, seasons came and passed as usual, the duties grew and multiplied, the tasks seemed overwhelming, but—one had to pull through somehow. "I've had to do it in other years," said Jane.

"But you're not the same Jane as last year, old girl," said her father. He had gone over to the mantel, and began hunting for his pipe. "The work is beginning to tell on you. You've got to stop. You've got to have a holiday."

He began to cut the plug of tobacco into flat strips, then put them into his palm, preparatory to smoking. Jane at the window stared out unseeingly.

"You do the most work, yet you never get a holiday. I tell you, Jane, there has to be a change in this family, and that pretty soon. It hasn't been fair to you. You've been the willing horse of the proverb, and therefore you've got the most work."

He paused to fill his pipe. Elzar came into the room with a tray containing delicacies. On the table the white cloth began to flutter as a gust of

wind blew through. There came to Jane a passing thought that the scent of the mignonette was wafted in on its breast no longer.

"Gwen will have to come and take your place while you go for a holiday. I've been thinking it over for weeks. Old McDougall told me months ago that I ought to be sending you to the South with the rest of the family."

Jane moved a little. Her voice sounded husky with weariness. "I haven't any desire to go to the South. Anyway, it wouldn't do to send for Gwen, and spoil her chances."

Silas grunted.

"It strikes me Gwen spoils her own chances with her airs and graces and false pride. She's very young though. Wisdom will come with years. After all, she's not nineteen."

"She seems to think it likely," she added in a low voice, "by what she said in a letter to me, that she would be engaged before she next wrote to me."

"H'm!" He puffed at his pipe several times, hesitated, then said abruptly, "I fancy she thought, too, when she was here, that young Warde was about to propose to her."

There was a sudden pause. Jane, with her back turned, closed her eyes tightly. It seemed a long while before her father spoke again, though the pause in reality was almost imperceptible.

Silas Dunkley had always treated the subject of Warde in silence.

"Mind you, I don't think Gwen's heart was at all concerned, Jane. I sometimes think her heart

hasn't quite developed yet." He puffed at his pipe, standing with his back to the mantel, his hands clasped behind him. Idly he watched old Elzar setting the table, placing a dish of cool green lettuce and red and white strips of radishes.

"I have often wondered," he went on thoughtfully, "what happened to Warde that night of Gwen's ball. He never came near the place afterwards. Jane, you are shivering! Come away from that window, girl, you're right in the track of the draught. A summer chill is a hundred per cent. worse than a winter one."

"There is hardly any draught at all," said Jane. "And I don't catch cold readily."

"But I saw you shivering," persisted her father. "I'm anxious enough about you now, Jane, without your getting ill and making it worse."

Jane turned from the window then. Old Elzar, drawing out the chairs, announced :

"De tea am ready, Mees Shane."

They sat down, while the old native woman and her younger assistant, an awkward, lanky girl of sixteen, newly promoted to the dignity of wearing the same apparel as white folks, waited on them. Silas Dunkley, between the pauses of the meal, continued the conversation.

"Yes, I have often wondered what happened to Warde that night. Something out of the ordinary. Do you know, Jane, I think it sent the boy in the wrong track, whatever it was. There was a letter or two came that day for him, Jane, I think. Do you remember?"

"I remember," said Jane. She set the cup from

which she was drinking in the saucer. It made a rattling sound as if her hand were unsteady. "One letter came and several papers."

Silas nodded. "Just so. I thought I remembered Gwen saying something about a coronet. I think it was prospects of the coronet Gwen was being so kind to. The heart, thank God, wasn't involved. I often wonder how Isabel told her the news, Jane. It must have been pretty hard."

"Yes."

"Yes, it must have been pretty hard for both," he continued thoughtfully. "Isabel said something to me once about Warde's people. I almost forget what it was. I was busy at the time, but, it appeared, he came of titled folk; not that it made any difference in my welcome to him. I liked the young chap. As long as a man is honest and straightforward, and plays the game, I don't care whether he is the son of a king or of a pavement sweeper. It is what a man is that counts, not what his forefathers were. In another hundred years it will be the aristocracy of democracy that will count. The guillotine of evolution, not revolution, will make sweeping changes. The Great War has shown the world that the old rotting and decayed ideas were of no use in the scheme of progression, mental, physical and spiritual, just as it showed the worth of the men from the ranks. The war has swept away for ever the old, languid, affected type neatly portrayed in many a novel. Affectedness and snobbery, often allied to sheer incapability, and stupidity had to go."

Jane listened in the strange, numbed way that had of late become familiar. She heard the words

distinctly enough, but they brought little or no meaning for the moment.

"Some folk sigh for the good old times," her father went on, astride on his hobby-horse. "Good old times, indeed! Why, less than a hundred years ago men scarce knew what freedom of thought or speech meant. There were thousands of disadvantages then, that were carefully draped over with the rags of tradition. It is so far back to look that they can't see things clearly. With most folk who talk like that, it is of course a pose. We are just slowly passing out from the age of the posing. I'd like to be alive a hundred years hence, Jane. Maybe in the scheme of progression I shall come back. Who knows?"

He swung back to his first theme as they rose from the table.

"About that letter that came for Warde last night, Jane, I believe it had some mighty bad news for the lad. It might explain a good deal. A lot of titled people are quite poor. The lad would not have been working like he worked for old Pedro Blackham, if he wasn't as hard up as he could be."

He wheeled a chair forward and sat down. Jane, preparatory to her usual solitary evening walk, was putting on her bonnet. The fingers that tied the fluttering strings were not quite steady.

"I liked the boy, Jane. I liked his pluck, and there's no man more sorry than I that he simply smashed his life to pieces. It must be pretty hard for his folks if they know of it. He could never take Talumeni home to his folks, I'm very sure, and"—

he added, "I'm rather afraid, if rumours are true, that he is going down-hill pretty fast." For the moment he had forgotten the presence of old Elzar in the room, clearing the table. "It's only the down-hill path that I've ever known a man take, who has made the mistake Warde has made."

"I think I'll go for a walk, dad," said Jane. She felt as she made her way to the door that she had reached the limits of endurance. The sword of anguish pierced her heart. Out in the soothing arms, of the night there was peace, and healing.

As she paused at the door, old Elzar, who would gladly have given her life to save Jane Dunkley hurt, unwittingly grasped the hilt of that sword of anguish.

She said, brushing methodically the crumbs from the surface of the white tablecloth into the silver tray :

"The doctor, he go to-day to Mistaire Warde an' Talumeni, over the desert road to the new hut they have built dem ; he go very quickly, when he come back he tell the news as he drive down the street——"

With a last slow twist she turned the sword in the wound.

"Talumeni," she announced calmly, "she have a little son."

Silence.

Then Silas Dunkley, pushing the spectacles up on his brow, turned his face to the door where Jane had lingered to listen.

"Jane," he said, "did you hear that?"

But Jane, it seemed, had gone without waiting to hear.

But in the darkened night across the now deserted street, on to the desert road she ran blindly. The wind had risen, and her thin dark cloak fluttered behind her. The faint sprinkling of the stars in the dark velvet of the night gave scarce any light. The road was a faint blurred grey to her feet. Thoughts whirled in ceaseless eddies in her brain.

She ran on and on like a mad, hunted thing into the night.

The wind shrieked in the trees on either side. On a roof of the last house a loose strip of corrugated iron banged and clattered. Behind her, as the tide swept on, it seemed that the hounded sea moaned and beat against the low rocks of Nyasha like a thing distraught. Derisive ghosts ran on beside her, keeping step, jeering ghosts gibbering at her, the fire of shame flaming forth from fleshless sockets and scorching her ; hideous mocking bursts of laughter flung their sharp javelins at her, grim, bony fingers pointed at her.

"So all the time," they cried out terribly ; "all the time he smiled at you, looked down in your eyes, he was laughing at you. All that time then——"

But she fled and at last outstripped them. She fell on her knees on the sand and cried aloud to the Mother of all sorrowful women.

The wind screamed through the wires of the tussocks, swirled the sand, flung the stinging grains in her face. There was a soul in the night wind too that at last grew pitiful.

It blew the dark folds of her cloak over her head and about her slim, shuddering body, a fluttering shroud of leaves drifted against her.

In the barren garden of the desert of Nyasha Jane Dunkley came to her Gethsemane.

CHAPTER XVII.

“ WHOA ! Whoa ! ”

The mail coach drew up with a sudden jerk, and the red-shirted driver, flinging the loose reins over the backs of the horses, jumped down and began to haul out the mail bags.

Two or three men of the waiting groups went forward as usual to help. They carried the canvas bags into the post-office and deposited them on the counter ; pressing the bell as an announcement to the world at large that the Nyasha mail had arrived.

“ There’s nothing much this time,” announced the driver. He wiped his brow with a huge bandana handkerchief. “ Phew, but it’s a dry day, boys.”

They took the hint and to a man escorted him to the nearest pub. It was a dry day indeed for autumn, and the verandah emptied quickly.

Jane Dunkley came into the shop as the echo of

the last footstep died away and, closing the outer door, began methodically to break the red seal and cut the string that tied the mouth of each bag.

One by one she emptied the letters out in a heap on the wide counter and began sorting and checking them. Holding them in neat piles of twelve with the left hand, with the right she lifted the date stamp. The monotonous thumping went on. The men from the hotel began to trail back again, talking loudly, laughing heartily over some new joke of the coach-driver. Some of them sat on the kerosene boxes piled at one end of the store verandah, others leaned against the posts. They drifted into amicable arguments on different topics.

Some one of them was talking about a pearl that had been found that morning.

"Bigest haul for a long time," a voice said. "About time he had luck of some sort . . ." said another.

The voices drifted by Jane, heard as something far off and meaningless—as she stamped on.

"There's a dozen or so pack camels on the desert road."

"They're not camels, I'll wager." A pause, then triumphantly, "What did I tell you? They're bullocks, old Sandy McDougall's bullocks."

Stamp, stamp, stamp, stamp from the office within.

"Old Sandy must ha' made a bit in his time, eh?"

"Oh, I dunno! Might ha' done. They're a savin' race."

"He kin recite—if you can get him to have a drop," said another thoughtfully.

"Oh, Sandy's not a bad old chap, take him all through," said a voice with a laugh in it. "I say, did you ever run down Scotland in front of him?"

A heavy guffaw or two. The voice with the laugh in it spoke again. "Did I what? I rubbed it in one day. My, and wasn't he mad about it! An' I never seen Scotland neither."

The door opened and ended discussion. The men filed in, lifting their wide-brimmed felt hats to Jane, pushing and jostling one another good-naturedly, a shy youth here and there blushing at the comments on the mail he expected.

"Mornin', Jane."

Lined in a moving, cheerful row against the counter, elbows on it as they leaned forward waiting, they flung the ball of repartee swiftly from one to the other. They were a happy, good-natured crowd, rough in the exterior, tender as a woman. They beamed with frank affection on Jane, and to Jane they were "her boys," one and all of them a part of her life, and entering into it.

There were few letters. Most of them had not expected any. Most received newspapers from the South. They lingered to talk to Jane, Jane who had grown so white and thin this last year.

"D'yé hear about the pearl, Jane?"

"Yes, boys." Jane bravely brought a semblance of her old friendly smile. Her mouth seemed always stiff and set lately as if smiles grew less and less easy.

" I suppose you're all thinking of giving up the farming and going in for pearling."

" Eh, but you don't get a haul like that always, Jane. A real nest of pearls, by Jove, and no mistake. Warde mightn't have such luck all the rest of his life."

" Perhaps not," agreed Jane. She began stacking the letters that had not been called for into their separate compartments. " Well, it beats the last Broome find, doesn't it."

" That'll mean a crowd of new pearlers, I suppose," said a new chum.

" Not this season," corrected Jane. " It is too near the ending. In a week or two the boats will be laid up until next season."

In the corner the seldom-used branch telephone shrilled suddenly and insistently three times, a call from the nearest head-office.

" Ting-a-ling ! Ting-a-ling ! Ting-a-ling ! "

" You'd better wait, boys," said Jane over her shoulder. " It may be a message for one of you, or some of your neighbours. It will save me going out if you take it."

Ting-a-ling ! Ting-a-ling ! Ting—

" Nyasha," said Jane crisply into the receiver.

" Coastferry," shrilled a voice faintly. " Can you hear me, Nyasha ? "

" Not very distinctly."

" Hullo ! "

" All right, Coastferry."

" Transmission of cable from Perth. Are you ready ? "

" Ready." Jane drew the pad and pencil

towards her, tapping absently with her foot on the floor.

"Warde—Earl Mountshields. Got that, Nyasha?"

"Repeat," said Jane. She answered in a puzzled voice and stared down at the pad. The pencil had made no mark as yet on the smooth surface.

"Warde, Earl Mountshields, Nyasha," shrilled the voice, and then confidentially. " Sounds queer, doesn't it? Didn't know you had any live lords in stock up there. What's it like?"

Jane found herself murmuring something unintelligible.

"Anything for us, Jane?" said a voice in the background; "or anything we can take?"

She shook her head mutely. They filed out. Jane never even heard them go.

Far away, at the primitive Coastferry mainland post-office, the thin voice went on, word by word, until the whole message was given. In a strange, unsteady straggling hand unlike her usual calligraphy, Jane wrote it down.

The thin voice began to read it over to ensure:

"WARDE, EARL MOUNTSHIELDS,

"The presence of your lordship is urgently required in connection with settling up of inheritance, also *re* large legacy bequeathed solely to you by Lady Anne Deerwood.

"HAYES AND WEYMAN, Solicitors."

"Got that?" inquired the voice at the other end of the wire. "I wonder if he'll remember us when he

gets the dough. When he says good-bye, Nyasha, hand him my card, will you ? ”

The buzzing sound of a laugh, and then, “ Leap year, too, Nyasha. I’d be there on the spot, only some one seems to have got there first with the goods. Are you ready for the sweet thing’s message ? ”

“ Ready,” said Jane. She felt that under her feet the floor was beginning to slide away from her. She clung desperately for a moment to the edge of the heavy table.

“ Same address, then, only Lionel in front of the Warde. Got that, Nyasha ? ” Then :

“ Shall I come out to you. Misunderstandings over. Love—Muriel.”

On a fresh cable form Jane wrote the message, pinned the two together, looked up the Post Office laws on the subject of cables from over the sea, although she knew them off by heart. She went to the letter-shelves, and from the fourth pigeon-hole from the end took out several letters and from the cupboard below gathered several papers.

They might as well, argued Jane, all go together.

She was suddenly calm but very cold. When she found herself shivering she said that autumn had swung in swiftly and earlier than usual. She thrust all thoughts out of her mind except those connected with her work. Indeed, they needed no superhuman effort. The exodus of thought suddenly took place without any volition on her part, and left her mind strangely empty.

From the recesses of a dim and musty cupboard

Jane took out a leathern satchel, little used as long as she could remember. It had held once or twice urgent messages for the one doctor of Nyasha, the call of some isolated soul in need. Once or twice only. It strapped across Jane's shoulder to the opposite hip, where it rested while Jane, on the back of one of Dunkley's fleet horses, galloped across the countryside.

With that cold calm still upon her, Jane too sent a message to the stores, and on to the stables, for the white mare to be saddled. Six miles by the sea-road from Nyasha was the abode of Lionel Warde and his dusky young bride. He had bought an almost deserted farm, half house, half hut, within sight and sound of the sea. If one took the incurving and oftener used road that followed the sweep of the bay, it was six miles to that farm-home. But across the desert, one wheeled sharply to the left after passing the isolated clump of pines; one who knew the ways of the desert could by a short cut make it three miles only.

Jane took the desert road, the sun level with her eyes. The white mare cantered out along the road that Jane and Lionel Warde had walked on a rainy day long ago.

Jane Dunkley had struck out and thrust many thoughts from her heart, but there were some that clamoured still at the closed door, beating for admittance.

She closed her eyes now as the white mare leaped forward and the white road raced beneath them.

It is impossible, however, to forget some things, when one takes an old road again that is crowded with old dreams. The barnacles of memory cling to every inch of the path. The black pines bore her back to that wet day that seemed far away : they whispered of everything that was said and unsaid.

The pines swung back, dipped into the background, and gradually grew smaller with distance. They went more slowly now across the sandy ground, the white mare picking her way through the thick-growing tussocks. Although the other way by the sea was a longer one, it was shorter as regards time, but Jane felt she could not bear the curious gaze of the townspeople, their frank queries as she passed by.

“ Anything wrong, Jane ? ”

She would have had to answer : “ Oh, only two cables from England for Mr. Warde. Rules of the Post Office that they must be sent.”

There were three reasons why Jane had elected to go.

She could not bear that they might question her, that she might be called upon to utter his name. Only that she had heard one of the men say that Sandy McDougall was again in Nyasha, unloading some goods at his first place of call, she would have sent some one else out on this errand.

Jane had come at last to the limits of endurance of many things. She had come also to the cliff-edge of health. She peered down into the darkness of the grim abyss of a nervous breakdown, and had drawn

back, shuddering. To-morrow, when the coach sped southward, she left with it. The doctor had said she must have six months' absolute holiday at the least. She had compromised with three. The winter and the storm of it breaking over Nyasha would find Jane gone. It was the time when she could best be spared.

The third reason, then, for Jane, on the white horse, making her way over the desert, was one which she never voiced even to herself. It was a yearning thought that lay close to her heart. In it was the curiosity—the only deep curiosity Jane had, by the way—the desire born of the maternal love that is in every woman for the man she loves, a desire to know how he fared, how he looked.

For since the days of his marriage Jane Dunkley had not met Lionel Warde face to face. Sometimes at a distance she had seen him, passing swiftly along the street. Once, on the opposite side of the road where the eucalyptus branches hung low over the path, he had gone by the stores. He always sent a native for his letters. Sometimes the letters and papers stayed there for weeks. Jane wondered if he ever read them when he received them.

Through the window Jane had watched him go, through the alternate sun and leaf-patterned shadows. He never looked across the street as he passed, so, maybe, he did not see the white-clad figure of Jane step suddenly inside the shop as he came in sight.

The sight of his stooping shoulders, his head bent in the path, stayed with Jane Dunkley as long as she

lived, brought her always that quivering stab of pain. He had been wont to walk with shoulders back, and head high, his eyes to the eyes of other men. It stabbed Jane now. A lump rose to her throat, a dimness to the grey eyes that for many a day had been dry and tearless. Jane had felt that she could never, never cry again, whatever happened.

With that aching in her throat she rode on. To the left as she mounted a low rise, came the swaying shimmer of the Indian Ocean, all blue and sunlit, flecked here and there with foam, up-curling and sparkling as if the gem-studded combs of a million mermaids ran through the rippling tresses of blue-green water.

And against the sea rose tall, slim spruces and young eucalyptus, the shining of the sun on an iron roof, then the whitewashed walls of the sea-farm gleaming through shrubbery which autumn had robbed of all greenness.

Jane slackened rein. The mare, picking her way across the last tussocked strip, went more slowly until she came to the road that wound in from the sea, and passed the house.

"Slowly," said Jane to the white mare, and "More slowly," as they drew near to a gate hanging on its hinges.

On the white beach, uncanvassed, a pearl lugger stood high and dry, tilted on one side. So Lionel Warde was at home, then, or in the township.

With a suffocating feeling in her throat Jane slipped from the mare. For one imperceptible

moment she leaned her face against the rough coat, then put the halter over the animal's head, and tied the loose end of the rope to the gate-post. The mare rubbed her nose against her and whinnied softly.

The silence broke all at once with a dog's barking and yapping and the rattling of a chain that told of confinement to the kennel. Somewhere a voice called out sharply. There was a note in it that brought Jane Dunkley back to a night when she had seen Lionel Warde half reeling out of the shadows of the eucalyptus, on the road by the stores. Jane, passing through the gate, closed her eyes ; when she opened them again she saw the master of the sea-farm standing in the doorway, staring stupidly at her.

“Jane—you ! Is it you, Jane ?”

His voice was hardly louder than a whisper, doubting, a little scared. Standing in the open door bareheaded, he stared at her. She stood quite still in the pathway, where a drift of autumn leaves was lying. Some of the leaves from the trees above fell on the little bonnet-like hat she wore.

He passed his hand before his eyes, and drew it away as one who knows it was a dream : that she was no longer there.

But Jane was still there. She began slowly to move towards him. Behind her at the gate the white mare champed, and nosed on the withering grass by the post. Warde waited without moving, without speaking. Mechanically he stepped forward over the threshold. Jane, her head bent, was nervously un-

fastening the straps of the leather satchel. It took her a longer time than usual to force the steel point of the buckle back through the tiny hole in the leather. Wordlessly he took it from her, opened it and handed it back. Her heart went out to him in a silent surge of pity. Life at the sea-farm had left trouble signs on his sunken face.

"Two cables—there are two cables for you," said Jane. She was white as death, but she took them from the satchel and handed them to him. "Two cables from England——"

"And you brought them, Jane." He took them without looking at them at all. A bright colour flamed into his face as he added, "Will you come inside for a moment and rest? You—look so tired."

She followed him into the first room, filled with the furniture of the former owner, but woefully neglected and untidy. It seemed to her that for what tidying had been done a man's and not a woman's hand was responsible. The pity of it sent the pulses hammering in her throat until she thought she must choke. She sank on the first chair in her way.

He was as much moved as she, although he stood there silent, offering her hospitality which he prayed she would refuse. The prayer was in his face for all eyes to read.

Jane put the contents of the satchel on the table by her, the table with its garish cover, of Talumeni's choosing, dropping down on one side, and stained and dirty.

She saw in the face with its ageing lines, from

which he strove to eliminate the full measure of discontent and suffering, what he had endured and was enduring. The whole place cried out of frowsiness, of the lack of a woman's care. The attempt at scrubbing had never been by a woman's hand. It was most pitiful of all pitiful things. The window near Jane opened to the desert. Far away, two miles away, a dark clump showed, the black swaying pines.

Jane looked blindly at them, then turning to him said :

"Has it always been like this? How have you endured it? Oh—I am sorry! I should not have said that—have said anything." She rose, her wide, candid eyes blurred.

The hot flush of colour that had flooded his face and neck died away.

He said simply :

"There is a pearlers' proverb that says when you make your path for yourself you must stick to it. I'm sticking to mine as best I can——"

She looked at him wordlessly. He gave one glance, then hurried away to tidy up something or other.

"God! That Jane should look like that. Jane, with her face grown so small and pinched, her eyes so big and unearthly. How drawn and unhappy was her mouth! Why did Jane look like that? Why?"

He came back to her across the room slowly.

They had both been steering away from all explanations, from all mention of Talumeni's name. Jane had decided that she could not be in the house.

Very likely she was down at the native quarter, perhaps out with Pedro on the boat. Jane turned to the door.

His voice stayed her.

"You look ill, Jane."

"I am not so well. The summer has tried me." She fought hard to speak as she would to any acquaintance. "I am leaving by the coach tomorrow for a trip southward."

"You are going away?"

"For three months." She made an attempt at gaiety. "I will come back stout and rosy, and, if it be at all possible, fashionable. Imagine the latter."

"I can quite well imagine it," he said with a grave quietness. For a moment he was silent. Old dreams that could never be, flitted by him. There was no reason for Jane to stay, yet he was loth to have her go. Just a little while longer, a little while.

The afternoon sun shone through the window and flung a quivering leaf-patterned haze of light on the floor. It showed the dull frowsiness and the faded green of the squares of carpet strewn here and there on the floor. The radiance danced into the room and magnified the general air of neglect, and made it a despairing thing. Out of it all Jane shone with the pearl-radiance of her pale face and the warm red of her hair. The little curls on her brow stirred in the breeze. Jane brushed them back from her grey eyes with the gesture he so well remembered. The hand looked so thin and bloodless that pain gripped his heart and he almost cried aloud.

"Mrs. Dunkley and Gwen have gone to Victoria for holidays," Jane was saying, for the sake of saying something. She, too, looked down at the dancing light at her feet. "They are at the Buffalo mountains. It is a most weird and wonderful place from all accounts. It is a famous resort, a magnificent miniature Switzerland. In the winter the ski-ing there is one of the sights of Australia. Gwen has sent me some winter postcards, the mountains covered with snow, towering high against the sky. And in the foreground merry ski-ing parties in gay coloured coats and caps. Summer seems to pass Buffalo by. It is so cool and green and shady now, when everything else seems parched with heat."

She stopped, and for a while there was silence in the room. To Warde her voice was as something that had materialised from out of the dreams of all the dreary days that had gone by since he last heard it. For her to speak like that, as if nothing had happened, as if the shadow of the bad thing he had done had not reached out in some measure to the house where he had been made welcome, lifted for a while the heavy weight that lay upon his soul.

"And Gwen is engaged." She went on to tell him about it.

Jane spoke of these things as she would have spoken of them had he been in the house as of old, drew gently aside the shroud of shame in which he had enveloped himself. It eased the overwhelming misery of that sense of slinking out of sight of his fellowmen, of taking byroads instead of main roads. It was as a healing unguent laid gently over torn

wounds. Under the cool touch the aching grew less.

Afterwards, when Jane went out of that door, she would take the meaning of the sunshine with her. On the floor the light was fading now. Soon the shadows would be in its place. Soon the shadows would creep in and flutter round his heart again. But to-morrow would be changed in this ; some of the heavy weight of misery would be gone. There would be new heart to struggle on in the way he had blindly chosen. The road ran on and he could not see the end, it was so hidden in darkness ; but the ray of Jane's coming, the memory of her voice and her dear eyes, would always now glimmer ahead. Many and many a night had he dreamed that Jane and he met face to face, in the wide spaces of the desert, on the cliff-path by the sea, in the little post-office of Dunkley's Stores. The dream had always ended the same way. On the desert dreaded sandstorms had swept suddenly out of nothingness, whirling the red up-curling clouds between himself and Jane, and when the storm passed there was no sign of her.

In the path that ran through the overhanging ti-trees under the great overhanging cliffs, they had stood face to face ; then, the cliff toppled forward and the gaunt arms of the ti-trees clutched out menacingly and a sea mist came and blotted out everything swiftly. He had awakened with the salt spray of it streaming down his cheeks.

In the little post-office Jane in her holland overall with the strings that were always coming unloosened,

her hair stirring in the wind, would step forward through the open door to speak to him; then a shadow darkened in the stream of sunshine that flowed from the door, and the Red Giant stood there a moment, and came forward and took Jane in his arms and held her fast, and somewhere a door in the world shut and he was thrust outside it.

Always in these dreams, though Jane had never spoken, she had been the Jane he remembered, smiling her wide friendly smile, with the little fascinating quirk in the corner of her grey eyes, a rose flush deepening in her soft cheeks, her brown hair red in the sunshine and gleaming with threads of gold.

Now in the autumn afternoon, they had met, no longer in a dream but in reality. The dreams after all had been kind to Jane. They had been kinder to him than he had known or realised. For she sat before him now, Jane and yet not Jane, with the soft cheeks hollowed and drawn, something subtly different about her mouth that wore but the faintest tremulous glimmer of her old smile. And he asked himself again, fiercely, "Why? Why?"

Jane looked at the sunlight on the floor.

"When it goes," she said to herself, "when the last patch of the sunlight goes—it is only a few minutes longer, I shall go too."

Afterwards she would not see him again. She must not. When she passed over the threshold of the sea-farm she must pass out of his life, he out of hers. She must never think of him again, in the old way, anyhow. Jane was too honest to admit even in her thoughts the possibility that in the days

to come he would pass quite out of memory. She had prayed hard that it might be so. Only yesterday she had made a last desperate attempt to step out of the Road of Shadows on to another road which she would not tread alone.

With her hand on the gate of the old road she lingered a moment, hesitating for the first step to the new road of new things, one of which maybe would bring a peace and contentment she had not hitherto known.

She deferred that moment of the shutting of the gate. She must do it quickly and, locking it, throw away the key, and look not where it had fallen, lest some day in years to be she should find herself on her hands and knees searching wildly for it in the tangled grass.

He stood quite silently by her, looking at the sunlight on the floor. How quickly it shortened and faded. It played fitfully on Jane's riding-boot for a moment, on the little gloved hand that held the riding-whip, on the empty satchel slung again over her shoulder.

When it came to the pale face he turned away. From the other side of the room he said :

"And when you come back, to Nyasha, do you take up the old wearing duties ? "

"I am going to be married," she said quite quietly. "I am going to marry Bernard Smith of Nyasha Station."

It had come at last, that for which he had waited. He had heard it often, never from Jane's lips. He had always known it would come to pass sooner or later, but it struck him now with no less terrible

a blow. He wished dully he had died before it came to pass.

"I heard it some time ago," he said. "Miss Dunkley told me of it one day long ago, a week or more before the dance she gave. She told me again on the night of the dance——"

He stopped. Impelled by something, he turned and looked at Jane. She had risen slowly. She stood, one gloved hand resting on the back of the chair. A spot of colour burned in either cheek, in a curious way. The sunlight flickered on her hair for a moment, vanished suddenly.

"She told you—Gwen told you—one week before the ball—and the night of the ball—that I was engaged to Bernard Smith?" Jane was speaking in a dull, lifeless way with difficulty. Her breathing did not seem to come readily.

There was a pause, then Warde answered :

"Yes."

"It was not true!" cried Jane. "It was not true until yesterday afternoon."

Her voice rang now in the room. It startled her by its loudness, by its vehemence.

"Jane! Jane!" Warde said in a queer, shaken voice. He stumbled across the room towards her. A flash of light seemed to flame between them. It showed the hideous mistake and Gwen's treachery ; it showed the long, torturing days.

When he stood face to face with Jane it showed him one other thing also, the bad thing that had flung the black gulf between them. On either side of its bridgeless chasm they stood and stared at each

other. Then Jane felt her way to the door and out into the last of the dying sunshine.

From the door the shadow of the house stretched out dark and cold. At the gate the white mare whinnied at the sound of her footstep on the path.

And as Jane went she saw in a patch of sunlight by the gate something she had not seen before.

On the white strip of sand a brown baby lolled in the sunlight gurgling and laughing, its tiny dark fist against its mouth : its little black head overrun with the close wiry curls of a native.

Jane stopped, her knees trembling under her. On the path the dead leaves rustled and murmured like living things. The brown baby rolled over on the sand and laughed and gurgled up at her.

White and faint Jane swayed. She put out her hand to the tall, red-green sapling beside her. The world swung away from her in a curious way.

"Mees Jane. Why, if it is not Mees Jane."

The cup then was not full. Nothing it seemed was to be spared her. In the doorway, Talumeni, whom she had forgotten, stood—Talumeni, yawning as if just wakened from an afternoon siesta by voices, a stupid look still on her dusky face and in her eyes.

She was horribly fat and untidy. The dress she wore, that had once clung to the slim lines of her body, now showed pitifully and hideously the change in her.

The dusky beauty of her face was a thing of the

past ; in its place was a bloated peevish look ; a roll of flesh showed under her chin, and in her dark hair, streaming back untidily, the scarlet hibiscus bloom flaunted no longer. Against the darkness of her breast a wonderful pearl, glowing as if all the fire of the sunset were on it, shimmered as she moved.

Jane had a wild desire to fling her hands over her eyes that she might not see. Between her and Talumeni, Warde came striding from the dark, cold shadow that the house flung. Talumeni was calling her and Jane had half turned back.

" Go ! " said Warde quickly. He went forward and flung open the gate for her to pass through.

The dead leaves drifted about her feet as she went.

For a moment she hesitated. The colour flamed in his cheeks as he added :

" You must not stay," and then as if the words were dragged from him by Jane's grey eyes : " She has been drinking again. She will insult you. I could not bear that she should say anything to you. For God's sake don't heed her. Go ! "

Talumeni began to waddle slowly towards the gateway. She screamed out something in Javanese to Warde. What it was Jane did not understand, but it hounded the blood from Warde's cheeks.

Jane untied her mare and mounted it.

Bending down with the reins held loosely in her hands, she said hurriedly, questioningly :

" The cables"; realisation swept over her for the first time that this man, standing here, allied

to the screaming, drunken half-caste in the pathway, was the man, who, in the words of the cable from overseas, was Lionel, Earl of Mount-shields.

He looked at Jane and then at the woman behind him.

With a sudden movement he tore the pink forms across and across. The wind in irony flung scraps of it to the baby on the sand. The tiny dark hands of the heir clutched at the paper as it rustled by, seized it triumphantly with gurgles of delight.

"Good-bye!" Jane said. She held out her hand—tears that were not for herself brimmed in her eyes.

"Good-bye!" he answered gravely, finality in his voice. He held her hand for just a little while and then abruptly released it. He slipped back and lifted his hat gravely, and Jane rode out from the gateway, turning her face towards the desert.

As if impelled, a hundred yards away she turned. Warde still stood where she had left him. Over the gate Talumeni leaned and waved her hand drunkenly.

Jane waved back. Afterwards she was always glad that she had done so.

A mocking peal of laughter fluttered after. Jane made no sign that she heard.

She rode slowly on, turning at the curve of the road, and breaking from it across the desert. She did not look back.

She rode back to Nyasha slowly, across the barren desert. Very far in the World of Fate she heard the

dull clang of a gate, the sound of a key turning in the lock.

The old road was ended. To-morrow the road of the future began. Though another would walk on it beside her in days to come, Jane felt she would be alone until the very last moment of her life.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WHOLE year had passed by since the new girl, who was prim and quiet and wove weird, wonderful patterns on traycloths and other things, stepped into the post-office at Dunkley's Stores and began to take up the threads of officialdom where Jane had dropped them.

Two months of Jane's holiday and of that first year had scarce gone when a petulant letter, travelling its slow way through the great Australian Bight, around Cape Leeuwin to Perth, to the last official port of call, came by medium of the mail coach to the Nyasha post-office, and being primly stamped and dated, and in all accordance with Post Office rules, was handed over the counter to Silas Dunkley, Esq.

In her sloping hand the second Mrs. Dunkley wrote of many things, of the children going back to college, of Gwendoline still on a visit to her fiancé's people ; and with the usual request for an additional cheque for additional expenses the letter ended characteristically.

"Just the sort of thing that one could expect of Jane has happened, at the very last moment and with all the packing and preparations for departure well on the way. The doctor whom I had to call in once or twice for the dear children, was here one day when Jane fainted. She always does do the most inconsiderate things ; I was most deceived in this doctor who I had really believed was a gentleman. It shows one can never tell from appearances. He was really most rude to me. He actually, without my authority, insisted on sending Jane to a wretched private hospital. And there she is at six guineas a week for the hospital bed and nursing alone, without the addition of the doctor's fees. He remarked with an attempt at sarcasm that the latter would be infinitesimal. So there is Jane in this hospital, six guineas a week, Silas, and the younger girl wanting ever so many things——"

"H'm," said Silas, with a mental reckoning up of the generous current account at the second Mrs. Dunkley's disposal.

"——and Gwen needing new frocks and hats, and hundreds of other things in keeping with her fiancé's father's standing——"

"Oh, damn Gwen's fiancé's father," said Silas with more emphasis than paternal-in-law feelings. "Land and cattle ain't everything. What I want to know is about Jane."

He hurriedly skipped the rest of the letter and came to the postscript where the discarded theme of the inconsiderate Jane was picked up again.

"Very run down the doctor says and she must have complete rest. As if she could not have rested just as well on the boat trip back. It left me at the last moment to catch the boat and no one to help me with the children, or know in what box Jane had packed things. Of course, the wrong boxes went down the hold and had to be hauled up again en route. It has quite spoilt my holiday."

Before the next day Jane, lying very quiet in the cool white bed of the "wretched" private hospital, received a cable from Nyasha.

The Matron brought it in opened and kissed Jane before she gave it to her. She said in her cheery, bustling way.

"I had to open it, dearie, to see if there were anything in it likely to upset you. You've got the Strictest Doctor in the world towering over the Very Strictest Matron in the world, and a queue of Very Strictest Nurses see that rules are obeyed."

And Jane, very white and frail among her pillows, laughed contentedly. Because her hands were too heavy to hold up long, one of the Strictest Nurses slipped one arm under the pillows and held her thin wrist with the other while Jane read.

"It is from my father," said Jane weakly. A dimness came in her grey eyes. "I should be home for the summer. It is so busy then—and he is getting old."

"Tut-tut! Listen to her," said the Matron reprovingly. She laughed. "Do you think that the world is going to stand still because you are having a badly needed rest? And he doesn't say a word about your coming back for the summer. He says you are to 'get well as fast as you can and take as long over it as you like.' I've never seen your father, dearie, but after that sentence I wouldn't be surprised if he's an Irishman. Isn't there Irish blood in your veins, now?"

"Yes," said Jane. "But——"

The Strictest Matron shook her greying head at her.

"But me no buts," she commanded. "What I want to know is the meaning of the last sentence. I never thought you were a flirt, dearie, but there it is in black and white."

With a preliminary exaggerated sigh, she read.

"'And all the boys send their love.'" The Boys in the Plural, too, if you please."

The Strictest Nurse, squeezing Jane's hand, gently said, "And I don't blame them."

"Nurse, I'm surprised at you, and you a member of the Young Women's Christian Association, too!"

The Matron's face was shocked, but the laughter ran up and down in her voice.

Jane loved that laugh of Matron Garland's. It was like little bells, a low peal of silver bells, of many

tones, soft and far away at first, running up in a crescendo of melody and down again. It was young like Matron Garland's face, and sweet like the eyes under the greying hair.

The first vague day that Jane came to Matron Garland's hospital, she had seen as in a mist that face bending over her, felt its sweetness and quiet confidence. That was the very first day, Jane insisted. The nurses would have told you that it was not the first day but many long days afterwards.

Jane had loved the Strictest Matron instantly.

She began to love the Strictest Nurses too, in the drifting, dreamy dayst hat followed, the hours slipping by so quietly and vaguely that one did not know when it was night or day. When one came out of the drift of dreams for awhile and thought it was day, one saw the just-quivering circle of a screened light reflected on the ceiling, and while one looked at it, lo ! it was gone, and a slow tide of sunshine rippled in its place. It was all very strange.

"The Boys," Jane was explaining shyly these many days afterwards in her weak, fluttering voice, "mean all the menfolk of Nyasha Island."

"What ? The married ones too, Jane ? " asked another Strictest Nurse, who wore a white piece of linen hanging down in a straight fold from her cap. She stood by the Matron and smiled down at Jane, and nodded her dark head at her.

The ghost of a smile fluttered about Jane's lips. "They are all just the Boys," she said. She began

to speak then of them, of the way they filed into the post-office, then all at once her voice wavered and broke like a snapped thread.

Out of the white morning mist of the desert that had wreathed itself suddenly about her, a soft voice with just the touch of the brogue in it said softly :

"Drink this, darlint," and lifted something that clinked faintly to her lips.

It was the little Irish nurse, Jane said dreamily to herself,—the little brown bird of a Strictest Nurse, who, walking as if her feet were shod in velvet, came always just as the tremulous sun ripple fled from the wall. And Jane slept.

Outside in the bright hall, with its thick carpets strewn on the brown polished floors that shone like a mirror, the Strictest Matron looked thoughtfully at the Strictest Staff-Nurse. They began to walk softly down the corridor that led away from Jane's room.

"She doesn't seem to mend," said the Staff-Nurse slowly.

"I wish," said the Matron, "that I knew what is keeping her back. I can see that the doctor is puzzled."

"She is weaker than the day she came in, Matron."

"Yes." She paused for a moment. "Her father sent me a cable, too, a long cable. Nothing is to be spared in the way of expense, he says. He wants an answer by prepaid cable. What can I say, if I reply truthfully, but three words ? "

"And those?"

"Just the words 'I don't know.' I don't think the doctor can say any more." The Matron was silent for awhile. "She reminds me," she added very slowly, "of a line of the old song,

"I'm wearin' awa', Jean,
Like snaw wreaths in thaw, Jean,
I'm wearin' awa to the land o' the leal."

In the room late one night Jane opened her eyes to see the little brown bird of a nurse sitting by her. She smiled at Jane and called her Mavourneen, and held a glass to her lips.

"In a little while," she whispered, "you will sleep again."

"I don't want to sleep," said Jane wearily, "I am tired of sleeping. I want to think."

"But you can do that in the morning, Mavourneen. Sleep, Jane Machree."

But Jane did not sleep, though the nurse sat as still as a bird in its nest, and the hours crept on. She stared before her, or up at the ceiling with a fixed gaze. Sometimes she did not hear the whisper of the little nurse. It was only a gentle twittering, a bird in the grasses of far-away fields, saying, with soft, monotonous insistence :

"Sleep—sleep—darlint. Try and sleep——"

At two the little nurse fluttered out of the room and in again. A little while after the Staff-Nurse came in very quietly and sat by Jane, and began to read aloud ever so softly.

Jane still stared at the shadowed wall at the foot of her white bed. The Staff-Nurse's voice drifted in a strange, unsurprising way into the murmur of the sea on the white beaches of Nyasha. Very gradually the murmuring of the sea became intelligible to Jane. It was speaking of things that had been, of days that were as dreams. The sea swept up the clinging seaweed of remembrance, strewed the rocks and the white beaches with the long streamers of brown and purple and faint gold where the sun touched the seaweed and sea-anemones. Jane came down the white beaches, her face to the sea, her slim feet to the incoming tide. The cool water laved them.

Then a cool soft hand drew Jane back. In a mauve wrapper and with her hair a little ruffled, the Very-Strictest-Matron-in-the-World was sitting by Jane. The Staff-Nurse with the twinkling eyes, and the little brown bird of a nurse had drifted away like shadows into the deeper shadows.

"Tell me all about it, Jane dear," the Very-Strictest-Matron was saying. Her arm lay along the pillow just above Jane's head. The cool fingers leaned over and touched the hot forehead. "Tell me all about it, and then we will both forget all about it."

She leaned her cheek to Jane's, the soft grey hair against the brown hair, the fingers of one hand still resting on Jane's hot brow, the other hand holding Jane's close.

"Yes—I can tell you," said Jane suddenly.

The Very-Strictest-Matron-in-the-World listened.

The faltering voice broke often, paused here and there, fumbled for words, took up the threads again.

Once the Matron lifted her hand from Jane's forehead for a second and passed the back of it across her eyes.

She saw the lightly-folded scroll of a girl's life open, the misunderstood, lonely little child left motherless, more motherless than ever when a new, strange mother came and took up the reins of government. Then came the days of girlhood, a girl's thoughts, with no one to understand, no one in whom to confide. The Matron's arm slipped down to Jane's shoulders and held her close. The little Matron must once have been a lonely child too. The story went on to the end, simply, yet tragic in the very simplicity of the telling, for the Matron saw more than Jane told. She saw the utter selfishness and indifference that had stripped Jane of almost everything. The Matron felt she hated the second Mrs. Dunkley. She felt she hated the whole family of the Dunkleys. She did not include Silas, however, in that sweeping hatred, although she felt she would like, just once, to shake him soundly, and sweep the scales from his eyes.

When the story ended the Matron held Jane very close. Long ago, too, the Matron had loved Someone very, very dearly. Whether he died, or what is most hard to the heart, married some one else, she did not say . . . she only held Jane close, and crooned over her as if Jane were a daughter that might have been hers. For a little while the Strictest-Matron-in-the-World played pretence that Jane was her

daughter, a little child-of-dreams grown up, sobbing her troubles against the mother-heart. For the first time in her life the Spirit of Motherhood put its tender brooding wings about Jane Dunkley.

So she slept—and in the sleeping, the soft-footed Angel of Healing came at last.

CHAPTER XIX.

JANE came back to Nyasha just in time to see the spring depart. Silas Dunkley and she came back in the dusk of one evening by a tramp-schooner round the island from Coastferry, where Silas had gone to meet her.

Bernard Smith had intended to come too, Silas told her cheerily, as the boat began slowly to churn its way from the mainland pier to the direction of Nyasha. Bernard sent his love and many messages.

Jane had made no remark.

To all intents and purposes she had come back the old light-hearted Jane. The glow of health was on her cheeks, the sparkle in her grey eyes.

It was afternoon when they left the mainland, and the sun lay on the water whose smooth surface was scarce rippled. Jane leaned over the white-painted railing and listened to all the news of Nyasha, a *résumé* of everything that had happened since she had left.

"A year ago," said Jane, looking at the sunlit water, "and it seems but yesterday."

"It has seemed years to me," said her father. He

surveyed her proudly. " Well, old girl, there's no mistake, you've altered in some things. Why, you'd give Gwen points for style. I'm not sure that you're not even better looking."

Jane had laughed. " Not a bit of it. Wait until you see me back in my old garb again. Fine feathers make fine birds. I'll look a very moulted specimen to-morrow, stripped of my fine feathers. I'm longing to get back to work, and to see all the Nyasha folk again. Have they missed me ? "

" They have for ever been asking questions about you, and always when you are coming back. But, Jane, there'll be no more working at the store. Bernard told me only last night before I set out to meet you that he wouldn't have it."

Jane said nothing. Her slim figure, in its neat garb of blue serge, and the wide hat with its pale green scarf wound simply round it, made no movement. With her face in her hands, her elbows resting on the rails, she looked thoughtfully over at the water to where, miles away, the blue line of Nyasha broke the sweep of the sea.

She began to ask questions again about Nyasha. She laughed often, as she stood there. Now and again they walked slowly along the deck, arm in arm, chatting brightly and pausing for a moment to lean on the rails and watch the light narrow and fade slowly over the face of the waters.

There was a new depth and firmness about Jane's face, an air of quiet purpose beneath all the gaiety. Now and again a faint trouble grew and stirred the pools of her grey eyes, and at these times she grew a little silent.

Of the one thing she perhaps most wished to hear, her father did not speak. Cheerfully he spoke of other times, of other things.

"Is Sandy McDougall in Nyasha at present?" asked Jane. They were walking up and down the deck arm in arm. "Or is he away carting over the mainland?"

"To think now that I forgot that," he answered. "Why now, he asked me a week ago or more when you were coming back. When I told him he said he'd wait. And he did. I suppose his will be the first face you'll see almost when we land—that is," jokingly, "if Barney doesn't push him off the pier, wanting to be first to meet you."

"Dear old Sandy!" said Jane a little tremulously. "It will be good to see him again." For a moment she was silent.

"He is staying later than usual for the spring trip," she remarked.

"Oh, he's been here some time. I think he doesn't intend to make more than one or two trips, anyway."

"Is he going back to Scotland, then?" A strand of hair blew in her eyes; she lifted it back.

"Eventually he will, I suppose, Jane. You see, he hasn't done badly this last season with the Sea-Farm. You know the land that runs down behind the house and follows the sea? Well, there are several hundred of good wheatland there."

Jane had drawn sharply back. The bright colour paled in her cheeks.

"He'll do well, will McDougall," her father added confidentially. "There's no doubt about that."

Jane, disengaging her arm, went over to the rail.

They were at the end of the boat, and she watched the long white funnel lift in the sea as the ship ploughed her way through. She was aware that her father was speaking, but his voice sounded thin and indistinct to her ears.

"The Sea-Farm," she said. "It belonged to Mr. Warde. Has he, then, sold it to Sandy—and gone away?" She was looking at the sea with a tense, waiting look.

"Why, didn't you know about it?" Silas said in surprise. "I thought I wrote and told you about it when you were ill. Perhaps, however, I forgot, I was so worried at the time."

"Was it so long ago as that?" asked Jane. She stared at the white funnel, the wide curve where the boat was stamping her course. Had Warde gone away? Was that why her father had not mentioned him? Well, it was for the best that it should be so!

"Long ago as that, why yes. Maybe it was before you went away, Jane. My memory is not as good as it was."

"No," said Jane, "it was not before I went away."

"Well, it must have been just after, then." He wrinkled his brows, striving to remember just exactly when. "Let me see now," he added slowly, "you have been away over a year; it was autumn when you left, and we are now on the break of summer."

Jane waited.

"Oh, now I remember. Of course, it was just at the beginning of winter; it's been the bleakest winter we've had for many a year, Jane. I remember

now when the first talk of the partnership arose. He took over a half-share from Warde. It was just a few days after Talumeni's death that I heard of it."

A cry leaped loudly from Jane's lips. It startled the old man with sudden fear. He put his arm around Jane lest she should faint, and his own face grew white.

" You're not going to be ill again, Jane ? " he said in a trembling voice ; " you are not feeling ill ? " He had suffered a great deal more in those first months of Jane's illness than any one knew. He had been so afraid that Jane would step out from life as quickly as the frail dead mother whom he had never forgotten.

Jane only said in answer, with white lips :

" Talumeni is dead—Talumeni is dead." She repeated it in a dazed kind of a way. She said it as if unaware she was saying the words aloud. There was revelation in her voice.

Old Silas Dunkley looked at Jane. He, too, spoke. He said in a low voice :

" How blind and stupid I have been . . . blind as a bat. . . ." And then he put his arm through Jane's trembling one, and drew her close to his side. They looked back over the sea for a little while in silence.

" She died," he said in a low voice a little later, " at the beginning of winter, Jane, a few weeks after you left Nyasha. It appears that she had been drinking heavily for a long time, and nothing Warde could do could stop her. Her mother was like that before her."

He gazed at Jane's still profile. The sunlight was

fading off the sea. She began to feel cold as she stood there, though the air was not chill, nor a keen wind blowing. At dusk they would be at Nyasha. She must fight hard to ward off any exhibition of weakness. She drew herself up and listened, bravely, making no comment.

"It was pneumonia that killed her," her father continued. "It appeared she had got very drunk with kava, the native drink, you know. She had started to walk home, although she had ridden into the village on one of Warde's ponies. Pedro quarrelled with her before she went. They say he said words to her which, if they were true, were mighty hard on Warde." Jane did not ask what they were. Indeed, it is probable that impatiently waiting for the story within the story, she did not hear. "Anyhow, to cut matters short, at two or three o'clock in the morning Warde came to Pedro Blackham's home to see if Talumeni were there and safe. The baby was ill and feverish too, it appeared."

Jane closed her eyes. She saw the brown baby with its black wiry curls lolling on the sand—the little brown gurgling baby, crooning in the sunlight.

"Pedro said she had gone home hours ago. Warde thought that she must be in some of the other huts. It appears that she had begun to frequent the native quarter a good deal of late. Pedro told him to go home, and not to bother his head over her. Talumeni would be all right. But Warde searched for her. He searched the native village, all round the township, even knocked at my door at four in the morning and asked if we had seen her go past."

Jane drew a quivering breath.

" He roused Pedro up again. It was a dark night, clouded, no moon or stars, and I lent him several lanterns. I went with him."

He told it quite simply, as if getting out of bed in the cold drizzle of an ink-black night with the wind howling over the cliffs were nothing.

" We searched for over an hour. At four o'clock—you know how dark it is at four of a winter's morning along the cliffs—we found her. She had stumbled and fallen over, not very far down, but sufficiently far for it to be dangerous to get her up with only the light of a few lanterns, but Warde managed it. How he clambered down, and then up with Talumeni's heavy weight, I don't know. I only know I couldn't have done it."

Jane saw the faint glimmer of the cliffs, the dead silence of the black night, the flickering lights of the lanterns and far away, in the Sea-Farm, with only a native girl or two, the plaintive wail of a little brown baby tossing feverishly and clamouring.

" He and Pedro got her home somehow. It must have been a terrible journey, short though it was. She had broken a leg, and they did the best between them until the doctor came. He was ten miles away the other side of the coast with a bad case. He didn't come back until eight o'clock in the morning. Warde struggled through the night somehow with the little help that Pedro could give. Pedro is helpless in anything like that, and, withal, he wasn't sober."

" Oh ! " Jane exclaimed, and then, " The poor little baby . . . the poor little, little baby . . . "

Silas Dunkley, hesitating as if to say something else, hurriedly resumed where he had left off.

"The doctor came in past the stores at eight o'clock exactly to the minute. I had waited up all night and walked several times along the road to hear the sound of his buggy and the horse's hoofs on the road. The horse and he looked about dead-beat when I saw them. The doctor was nodding as if unable to keep awake. He said he had had a bad night, the worst case he had ever had. But when I told him he was needed he lashed up the horse and pulled himself together. He wouldn't wait even for a drink of tea, although I had some ready. They say he stayed there for hours too. He fought for her life, but the pneumonia settled everything. She was dead before midnight."

Jane's face paled and her eyes shut tight with a spasm of pain. Talumeni had been of Nyasha, of Jane's small world. The girl forgot all but the slim girlish Talumeni with the dusky beauty of her face, walking lightly by, with the flame of the hibiscus blossom in her hair.

Then all the calm of the last year fled from her, and was blotted out, leaving her on the rack.

"And he stayed in Nyasha?"

"He stayed. There was some rumour about his being left a title or something of that sort. It appears, however, that there was no money with it at all. I don't think he ever answered one of the letters that came."

Her father's grasp tightened on her arm and they remained thus for the space of a minute, then he drew her to the seat.

They sat there until the boat swung suddenly on towards the land that had steadily been growing

larger. Silas Dunkley had said no more to his daughter on the subject, and so left something unsaid. He strove to bring back the colour to her cheeks, and all the time he said to himself in a puzzled way, two sentences over and over.

"What a blind bat I have been! . . . What a blind bat I have been!" . . . And last, but first in his thoughts: "She is engaged to Bernard. . . . She is engaged to Bernard Smith. He is a good man. He would make her a good husband, no man could ask for a better son-in-law——"

And so at last they came to Nyasha.

CHAPTER XX.

THE window was open to the moonlight.

The only lights in the room were those of the tapers under the golden yellow shades of the piano.

Jane, seated on the stool, was turning over some music that the girls had left behind in the last school holidays, when he came in.

From the arm-chair by the window her father moved and said :

"Here's Barney, Jane."

Jane rose to welcome him and gave him her hand. A little colour crept into her cheeks, and a smile fluttered across her lips.

"It is good to see you again, Barney," she said.

There was warmth and sincerity in the words, yet something fell dully on the ear of Bernard Smith. He had waited for this hour, to meet Jane when there would be no prying or teasing eyes to see, and so he had not been on the pier among the crowd when Jane came. He had said to himself she would understand.

The thing he had hoped was not there, that sudden exquisite blush, the swift leaping of the grey eyes. His own heart had pounded madly as he crossed over the threshold. He had hoped to take Jane in his arms, to see her make one step forward in his direction.

But Jane had done none of these things. She had just given him her cool slim hand and had said, sincerely yet with no deeper meaning than that of friendship :

“ It is good to see you again, Barney.”

Just that ! And no doubt to every one of those who waited on the pier she had said the same thing, with the tremor of colour fluctuating in her face, and frank gladness in her eyes. He made a quick movement and then, restraining himself, stood still.

“ How well you are looking, Jane,” he said. His laugh shook a little. “ And the very latest style of styles, too.”

He touched awkwardly the shining fabric she wore, something soft and grey with delicate laces here and there, and a knot of red-golden velvet the colour of her hair, at her breast. Jane seemed suddenly to have bloomed forth. She looked up at him with a little fleeting smile.

“ I am glad you think I look well,” she said gently. “ Shall I begin to tell you all about my holidays, or play to you first ? ”

Her eyes had gone a little wistfully to the piano. She would have liked to-night, Jane said to herself, to play alone in the dusk. The old house

was so full of old memories that had stirred her strangely.

Her father on some pretext had left the room. Through the wall they could hear him moving about in the room he used as study and office combined.

"Would you like to have a chat with father, instead of listening to me ? " asked Jane. She went over and seated herself at the piano.

"No, I'd rather stay, Jane."

Somewhat aimlessly he wandered over to a chair near and sat down.

Sitting bent a little forward, his hands clasped between his knees, he listened in a desultory fashion, the light of a great desire in his eyes, now shadowed deeply.

While Jane played softly on, he said to himself, shaken by suffering, surprised at its very intensity, that if Jane did not love him, he would not hold her to her promise. He would know, through the medium of the music, whether Jane cared or did not care ; for very soon he knew Jane would drift suddenly, forgetting that any one else was in the room, into melodies of her own composing. Long ago, she had once said, they were songs without words that drifted out from her heart.

So he waited. He sat very still, the cigarette he had lighted growing cold in his fingers, for all at once, quite quietly, Jane, lifting her head, and staring unseeingly into the shadows before, began to play.

The music rose, low at first, tremulous like the clear call of a bird in the thicket. There was a wind

that went murmuring and rustling through pine-trees, half shrouded in the pearly mist of morning. Slowly, tremulously, a faint, wondering sweetness rose, breaking slowly like the sunset. It grew and grew.

Sitting bent a little forward, his hands clasped between his knees, Barney listened in the shadows.

They were alone in the room. Yet not alone. For as Jane played on he knew that some one, invisible to all but the inner eyes of the player, came into the room.

The steady marks of the silver moonlight lay on the floor. In the garden the tall dark trees stood tall and still, on the white boles of the red gums the light glinted and danced as on a silver shield. A faint fragrance swept in, the faint, subtle perfume of the last of the golden wattle. And Jane played on.

At last the notes lingered, died away very slowly, for the girl's hands lay on the keys still. Then suddenly Jane did a thing that he had never seen Jane do, something that wrung his very heart by its intensity and unexpectedness.

Her face went down on her hands, the still hands that lay over the keys.

"Jane." He could only whisper her name. It seemed a long while before she heard him. She sprang up suddenly, roused to the consciousness of his presence in the room. Her eyes were still a little dazed. They brimmed with passionate tears.

He took her hands in his and held them tightly.

In a low voice he said, "Who is it, Jane?" And then with sudden passion, roughly, "What does it matter? Whoever it is, it is not I. That is all that matters."

He dropped her hands and moved unsteadily away.

Jane followed him, her face very pale in the moonlight. She knelt by him as he sank into a chair, and placing her hands on his knee, she said, half-whisperingly :

"I will not lie to you, Barney. I do care for some one—oh, very, very dearly. I have tried so hard not to. Oh, I have tried. . . . But I have given my promise to you, and I will keep it."

He lifted her face and looked into her eyes, at the quivering mouth. The tears brimmed over. Some of them fell on his hand. Her mouth was quivering like that of a little child, pleading for pardon.

"I will try to be a good wife to you, Barney," she went on. "Perhaps then I will forget——"

He bent and raised her to her feet. He stood up, tall and still, a head and shoulders higher than she. It seemed hard at first for him to find words. For a big man his voice was astonishingly gentle.

"You know, dear, that though I have spoken little of love to you, it has always been there deep in my heart. It can never be rooted out, whatever comes to pass, Jane. But," and the quiet calm of his voice broke, "if there is anyone that you love, I shall not stand in your way. There is nothing in the

world, Jane, that I would not do for you. It is an easy thing, it seems to me, to die for the woman one loves. The hardest thing of all that is hard in this world is that I have to live without her."

She was sobbing against his breast. Her little brown head was resting where often he had dreamed it rested. In the reality there was a great, great difference between that of the dream.

He stroked the shining waves of her hair tenderly ; staring over her head for a long while, his lips set grimly.

"I will keep my word, Barney," said Jane, her voice muffled, and again : "it is all over and done with, I have put him out of my life."

"But not out of your heart, Jane?" How he waited for her answer, for her to say quickly :

"Oh, yes, yes! It's only that such moments come, borne on the flood of emotion, or something that stabs one with a memory one had thought forgotten."

But Jane took a long while, it seemed, to answer. Her soul, clear and candid as her eyes, would not lie to him, and he said to himself, in a dull, dazed way :

"Who is the man? If she had not gone away from Nyasha, for that year in the South, she would not have met him. It must have been some one there. Who else could it be?"

An answer came, but not from Jane's lips. Out of the shadows of the long passage without, a voice called :

"Are you there, Jane?"

Jane ran quickly to the door and flung it open.

She stood there rigid and expectant, her hand on the door knob, outlined against the brown-painted panels.

When Sandy McDougall looked at her face he knew that he had not trudged weary miles across the desert in vain; he knew also that in some vague, inexplicable way that Jane Dunkley knew why he had come, although he had not spoken.

He spoke bluntly.

"Warde is very ill at the Sea-Farm, Jane. He has been down for some weeks with fever. It is not infectious. He has asked so often for you that I'd be glad if maybe you could see your way to come."

She said, with one hand to the laces at her breast: "When?"

He looked at Bernard and then back at her gravely.

"I'm thinking that if ye would be comin' at all, Jane, ye might as well come noo."

He answered the question in her eyes gently.

"He may be no here in the mornin'," Jane. There's nae tellin'."

"I will come at once." She made a quick step forward, and then suddenly she remembered the man in the room behind her.

She said to McDougall, "Get the buggy ready, Sandy."

At the door, leaning back against the panel, she waited until his footsteps died down the passage-way

and sounded on the gravel yard outside. She heard her father's voice asking questions, the neighing of a horse as a lantern light flashed into the recesses of the stable.

Then she went back into the room. She said, quite quietly and in a low voice :

“ It seems that Fate has answered.”

Bernard had risen from his seat ; he walked to the window before he answered, and spoke without turning round. It was a voice that did not sound like his, so many emotions were in it. She traced them all, and once shivered.

“ So,” he said, with a deep bitterness of spirit, and a deeper note of trouble in his voice, “ so he—is the man. My God ! ”

“ Yes,” said Jane. She said it quite simply. She made no effort whatever at prevarication or evasion.

“ Did you know he was ill, so very ill ? ” she asked.

“ Yes,” he said. “ I heard this morning that the doctor had little hope for him.” Then suddenly anger flamed through him. “ And you are going to him, you, Jane, of all women ! My God, and after what has been ! ” His hands clutched at his side, his eyes stared at the moonlit garden. Suddenly he cried to her : “ Jane, do you love him so much ? Do you love him so much——”

“ He is my life,” said Jane in a low voice.

“ Then you have never given me more than friendship. Oh, I have known that and yet denied to myself that I knew. I said that some day your heart would turn to me.”

She sat in a chair as if standing had become

impossible any longer. The softened, yellow-shaded, candle light fell on her face and was kind to her.

He walked round to the back of her chair, looking down at the shining of her bent head.

Standing there, he said, in a heavily troubled voice, "Dear, are you quite, quite sure?"

"I am quite, quite sure," she said, and then with a sudden rush of passionate feeling: "Living or dead, no other man could have the same place in my heart."

She waited a moment, then, with her hands dropping to her side, said slowly: "Barney, if—he died, I think my very heart would close up, it would never beat again."

For a little while there was silence between them. The crunch of wheels echoed on the gravel, and there was the sound of a gate clanging.

He began to fling forth passionate, burning words, bitter words that dropped dully at last into silence, and then he put his hand on her shaking shoulder and spoke in a different voice.

"Forgive me, Jane," he said hoarsely, and then, "I leave you free." His lips touched her hair a moment and then he went.

She heard the door close behind him and a wild feeling came over her to call him back.

McDougall's voice spoke. It said gently:

"The buggy is at the door, lassie. Here's your cloak and bonnet."

Her father said no word as he helped her in. But as McDougall and he turned towards the silver heart of the moonlight night she saw the trouble in

his eyes. She had thrown her arms around him and kissed him in a passion of grief.

"I must go," she said over and over and again,
"I must go."

He made no answer. He seemed to have aged all at once as he stood and watched them until they were out of sight.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN the delirium Lionel Warde babbled of many things, strange things, of far-away places and far-away voices. In that night of the crisis the soul of him seemed to have left the prison of the body and gone back to old ways and old places.

Meadows of English grass, elm-trees in the cool of a summer night, lawns that ran down to a shining river, spring in an English county, and always in the background an old and stately home on a low hill.

The soul of him lingered a long while there, strayed through ways familiar in boyhood; over and over again he spoke of the things that seemed wrapt around his boyhood, held close to his heart through all the vicissitudes. Once he called out on a woman's name in an hour of the night that Jane and McDougall kept watch.

"Muriel . . . Muriel—you were cruel . . . but it was the money you wanted always . . . only one does not always see these things. . . . That night at the ball . . . the band playing . . . you . . .

promised so much. . . . I was to come back in a year . . . there were to be strings of pearls, of wonderful gleaming pearls. . . . You always loved costly things, Muriel. . . . ”

McDougall went out of the room for a while. He said to Jane :

“The doctor should be here soon. I’ll be watching on the road for him. Ye’ll be calling, maybe, if you want me.”

And Jane, in the room, whispered to herself over and over again :

“Muriel ! Muriel !”

He was babbling of other things now—he came back to Nyasha, to the Sea-Farm where he lay, and now trouble grew in his voice.

“Talumeni . . . why did you deceive me like that . . . why did you lie to me . . . and Pedro, too, Pedro knew it was a lie. And I had to suffer in silence. I could not even tell her. . . . I could not even tell Jane. . . . She had simply to go on believing the worst of me. . . . It was the hardest thing of all to know that, and that Talumeni had lied. . . .”

His voice broke, rambled on unintelligibly. All through the long night he rambled and wandered, the words weak and undistinguishable. Just as the dawn broke and the doctor walked into the room he drifted off to sleep.

McDougall beckoned Jane out to the adjacent sitting-room, where a fire crackled in the grate. It was very different from that day when Jane, riding the white mare, came last to the Sea-Farm.

McDougall drew a chair up to the fire and made Jane sit in it. While he waited for the kettle to boil he leaned against the high mantel and stared down into the leaping heart of the fire.

He began to speak in a low voice, for in the next room by the bed, the doctor sat silently, one hand on Warde's pulse, and looking fixedly at his watch.

"'Tis a queer world," said McDougall. He waited as if for Jane to say something, but she was looking into the fire.

"For instance, there was that Muriel woman," he went on. If he noticed Jane shiver, he gave no sign. "Turned him down in England, she did, when he had no money, and married a wealthy man. It reads like a book, Jane, it does. For the wealthy man died and left her with barely anything, and so she lost by it; and now she comes out here—where she's nae wanted."

Jane looked up quickly. "Here," she repeated. There came back to her the meaning of a cable signed Muriel.

A year ago it had arrived. It had asked :

"Shall I come?"

Something chill and cold laid its hand on Jane's heart. Had he then sent for her? Had he found the old love grown strong again in his heart in this year she had been away? It was only a few hours ago, though it seemed years since she had come back to Nyasha. What had happened in the meantime?

McDougall answered :

"Yes. She came with a lawyer, and another woman, in the morning. They were here for hours the two of them. He didn't know them, and I had a bother to get rid of them. They went just before I came for you, Jane. I'd ha' brought you before, only for that, ye know."

Jane sat very still. The attitude of her head resting against the faded cretonne of the covered chair was suggestive of infinite weariness, and, deep underneath the weariness, infinite suffering.

"And this woman frae England," McDougall went on. "She told me she was engaged to him. I thought maybe ye could be contradictin' that? Hae ye nothin' to tell me, Janie?"

"I?" said Jane. She looked up at him quickly, then her lashes fell, and the thin, sensitive hands on her lap trembled slightly.

After a while she said, in an odd voice.

"Last night, in his delirium, he called her name several times." Her voice faltered for a moment, then gathered strength. She went on hurriedly: "I have nothing to tell you, Sandy." The old Scotchman stared in front of him. "Why do you ask?" Jane's voice came quickly, perturbed, and with effort. "Why do you ask that, Sandy?"

"You ken, lassie," he said, with direct simplicity.

"But I do not," she retorted quickly; then stopped, choking. "Oh, I do know," she said in a whispering voice, "I do know, Sandy." He waited. "But there's nothing to say," the whispering voice said at last. "We were just friends, after all.

Maybe I've been foolish and dreamed many things. We all have our dreams, Sandy," she was twisting and untwisting her hands.

"Aye," Sandy replied. "We all have our dreams." He looked into the heart of the fire, his face turned away from her. Then he roused himself, "We mun take but the road markit out for us, I'm thinkin'," he said after a pause. "Each yin has his ain road tae travel, lassie."

He was silent for a while. When he glanced at Jane he saw that her thoughts too were far away. She was thinking of the many times those black-edged letters had come for Lionel Warde. Oh, the mad dreams that once she had had! These things were not for her. How could ever she have expected it, she, Jane Dunkley, with her plain face and plain ways? That year away had taught her one thing, that she loved Warde with a great and overwhelming love, high and free from passion, free from sordid motives. In all this time he was to her just Lionel Warde of Nyasha. It is doubtful if any thought of his heritage came to Jane at all. It was something far away and vague that had no meaning. All that she was conscious was that he was the man she loved with an intensity that had shaken her very soul.

"And I shall always love him," whispered Jane, "always," and she strove to turn then and there to the road of renunciation.

"Are ye holding onything in your heart again the lad?" McDougall said gently. He bent forward, and pushed a smoking log into the glowing heart of the fire. "Because ye need not, lassie."

"An' I think there's one thing," he continued laboriously, "that ye should be knowin'. 'Tis the wee bit difficult to tell ye, Jane, but 'tis a time when a bit misunderstandin' can be causing a deal o' trouble." Just for a moment he hesitated, and then, still looking into the fireplace, said gently, "the boy hae suffered for the sin of another man."

It seemed to him a long while before that sentence brought meaning to Jane Dunkley. Then she wheeled on him with startled eyes.

"Another man," she repeated, "another man." She had risen and stood staring at him, only half understanding. His voice came from a long way off. It was stern now.

"Aye. She confessed it the night before she died." He still looked away from her. "'Twas best ye should be knowin'. I'd not like to see your heart bitter against the boy for a wrong blamin'. Ye ken?" he asked simply.

"Yes," and again in a low voice. "Yes, I understand."

Her hands twisted and untwisted. They trembled violently.

"Well, as I hae the horses to attend to, I think I'll be leavin' ye for awhile," said McDougall. Without looking at Jane, he took his cap from the rail near the door. "Ye will gie me a call, lassie, if I'm needed."

As he turned to the door there came the sound of a gate opening, of voices and steps on the brick path without.

It was a hand from without that, following

a preliminary knock, opened the door before McDougall could perform that office.

A woman stood framed in the open doorway, against the sunshine, a slim, elegant woman, who, with her head lifted, and with an air of proprietorship, looked questioningly at them both.

CHAPTER XXII.

MURIEL WRIGHT looked around her in undisguised disgust.

The window, with its soiled blinds, was dusty, the shelf under it crowded with a heterogeneous collection of newspapers and coverless magazines and cheap books.

The tablecloth, though spotlessly clean, was torn, and drooped untidily at one corner. On it, as McDougall had clumsily placed them, the breakfast things were strewn in untidy disarray.

"Dreadful!" said a voice. The owner, a portly, tightly-corsetted woman of uncertain age, followed it into the room. She shuddered daintily. "Quite dreadful! How people can go on livin' in the Colonies I can't think." To Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright, Nyasha was ever afterwards "the Colonies."

"Dear me, Muriel! Just think of the poor boy having to endure this."

Her glance wandering around the room came to Jane. She looked hard at Jane for a moment and then, lifting her eyebrows, at her daughter.

"Warde can no be seein' ye," said McDougall grimly.

Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright turned and stared at him. Her gaze for a moment seemed transfixed with amazement. She fumbled in her bag and, bringing out a lorgnette, gazed fixedly at him.

"My good man," she began. But McDougall went on undaunted, though the lorgnette obviously perturbed him.

"My guid wooman," he said sourly, "ye can no see him the day. 'Tis the doctor's orders."

In spite of herself Jane laughed. That scene in the kitchen for ever afterwards impressed itself on her memory. The slim, elegantly-dressed young woman who stood with the mocking light in her eyes; McDougall, the old Scotchman, blocking up the doorway and blotting almost completely out of sight a tiny lawyer-man, who seemed to be having a succession of nervous attacks in his endeavours to get past; and portly Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright, who had sunk into a chair, with the shock of McDougall's mode of address.

Breathing heavily, very red of face, words seemed to fail her.

"How quaint!" drawled the younger woman. She laughed lightly and as if at the sound of it, the door of the bedroom opened suddenly and the doctor came out.

He rubbed his eyes as he looked at the group, and the lorgnette came into action again.

"Some visitors from England," said McDougall, with an introductory wave of his hand before any one else could speak. He vanished. "I can safely

leave the rest to the doctor," he said to himself, almost stumbling over the wee bit of lawyer.

He heard the doctor's voice already answering questions, as he went.

"The crisis is over," he was saying; "but you cannot see him to-day."

"I came to nurse him," said Muriel Wright's voice softly. She came forward, a dainty figure incongruous in that rough room, appealing and elegant. The doctor looked at her and wavered.

"But Miss Dunkley has been acting as nurse," he said. Then he glanced at Jane's tired face, and considered the proposition thoughtfully. "It would be very good of you," he continued slowly; adding, "you are perhaps a relative of my patient?"

"My daughter," said Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright pompously, "is really engaged to him."

Her daughter, flushing delicately, made neither denial nor affirmation.

The little lawyer, no longer denied the port of entry, flung himself into the silence.

"Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright," he said with a bow in the direction of the breathless lady in the chair, and, with a deeper bow, "Lady Wright—daughter of Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright."

The doctor acknowledged the introduction, as if he were not yet very sure whether he were asleep or awake. He glanced at Jane standing very still and pale.

"His lordship," went on the lawyer, dropping his voice as befitted the impressive occasion, "is needed in England. You, perhaps, are not aware of his identity, doctor. He is now the Earl of

Mountshields and has also inherited a large fortune left him by his godmother."

The doctor scratched his head thoughtfully. He would wake presently and find himself in the ancient mud-spattered buggy, the reins tied to the rail of the splash-board, and the old horse making its way homeward.

"Lords, and Dukes, and Duchesses," he exclaimed to himself with a Colonial want of appreciation, when he assured himself that he was awake. "It reads like a scene out of a penny paper novel."

It appealed to his sense of humour, and he looked quickly at Jane, waiting to see her eyes, solemn enough, but the corners crinkling up in a tell-tale fashion; but Jane was staring out of the window as if uncertain what part she must play.

"I would be glad if I might do the nursing." Lady Wright was saying in her languid drawl.

"But can you nurse?" asked the doctor bluntly. Muriel thought his manner rude almost to uncouthness. She was wont to say afterwards, with a shudder of remembrance, that the Colonials had no reverence, and Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright, if present on these occasions, always added that—

"The people in the back-blocks make no distinction between a king and a scavenger. Dreadful people! most dreadful! So—so very primitive. They are different, of course, in some of the cities. Folks say that they overdo it there, that the Lord Mayor starts making preparations for a banquet almost as soon as one has booked one's passage. But they don't do this in Nyasha."

"I have had a little experience of nursing,"

Muriel was saying now, a little resentfully. "During the war I was at the Exclusive and Influence Hospital in France."

"Umph!" said the doctor. The nursing in that case, he knew from a colleague who had been there, would be of the kind that dressed in a smart nursing costume, specially designed for the occasion—posed itself in a theatrical attitude by long rows of beds, or among a group of real nurses whose thoughts were sometimes mirrored in their eyes.

He looked at Jane. "What do you think of it?" he said. "I've several cases to go to, and cannot get back for several hours."

"He is all right now?" Jane questioned. Her face was very pale, the dark shadows of weariness were beneath her eyes.

"Yes." He looked at her keenly. "And what matters most, you're very tired, Jane. Perhaps it would be well if you had a rest. Could you come over occasionally? I'm so busy that, try as I will, I cannot come as often as I'd like."

"I think," said Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright, with the inquiring glance in Jane's direction, "that my daughter and I might arrange the rest of the nursing between us; thank you all the same, doctor. We need not trouble the—er—the young person at all."

"If it could be managed," said Jane to the doctor in her low voice, "perhaps it would be better for—friends to be with him." She stared desperately out of the window now, speaking over her shoulder.

"Oh, it can be managed all right!" he said. Somehow, without knowing why, the doctor felt disappointed in Jane. It was not like Jane Dunkley

to desert her post at the first opportunity. "The lad's on the mend, and sleeping peacefully now."

He turned to the others.

"Miss Dunkley would be glad if you could take her place, then. She has been travelling for several days and was up all night." He hesitated a moment, tapping his fingers a little irritably on the table by him. "I will write down directions for the duties necessary. You might follow them," and then, as to himself, "after all the worst is over."

He drove Jane home along the white, curving beach road.

"McDougall," he said once, irrelevantly, "will keep an eye on things."

Jane made no answer. She seemed to have lost all interest in the subject.

He flicked his horse cheerily with the whip.

"Did you think, Jane, that you'd ever live to see this day?" he asked with a laugh. His own tired face relaxed. "Fancy that old kitchen of the Sea-Farm, its roughness, in spite of all Sandy's cleanliness, and the picture those women made in it."

Jane smiled tremulously.

"'The lilies of the field,'" quoted the doctor, and then emphatically, "I'd not give my wife for any of them, Jane. God never created women to be like that, Jane, any more than He created this world to have sin and trouble in it. These things are but the products of so-called civilisation." He was silent for a while. "And those doll women with their painted faces and flimsy dresses. If I performed an operation on them for trepanning, I'd find shrivelled

and narrowed cells in their brain, if I didn't quite find sawdust. God ! Imagine it ! Just like dormice on a wheel of gold are they, shut up in a stuffy cage, and the golden wheel lit up with artificial light. No wonder they are all of one pattern, of one idea, and seekers after the sensation of individuality."

"I think the poor things are to be pitied," said Jane. She drew in a deep breath of the morning air, and lifted her eyes to the great sweep of sea and sky. This at least was her heritage It could not be taken away from her.

"I don't think you could ever become like that, Jane," said the doctor enigmatically.

As they drove up to the verandah of the stores and Jane jumped lightly down, he said in his characteristic way :

"Oh, by the way, Jane, when young Warde stepped out into the Road of Healing, he asked for you. When he was raving at the beginning he called often for you, while you were away. Did I tell you that before ? "

"No, you didn't tell me," said Jane. She stopped as if to add something more, then went indoors.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NOT until she had shut the door between herself and the outside world did Jane realise what the strain of the hours had cost her.

She leaned against the shut door and closed her eyes. Her cloak slipped unheeded from her shoulders on the floor where the sunlight danced. For a long moment she leaned there, her forehead pressed to the cold wood, one hand clenched at her side. All the last year seemed in vain, its strivings and resolves of no purpose. For a moment there gleamed up in the soul of Jane Dunkley the primitive fire of womanhood.

In crises like this, every woman is the First Woman. She is Eve facing for one moment the truth, naked and unashamed, the First Woman fighting for her mate. Then centuries of that which we call by the name of civilisation threw its weight into the encounter. Jane was beaten, forced to her knees.

Slowly she made her way to the bed, and lay there for a few minutes facing the future.

How lonely, how loveless and grey it was to be—

how great a gulf stretched between to-day and yesterday !

Yet the sun still shone on, the birds in the trees outside chirped and whistled merrily as if nothing had changed. She too must go on. She must go on somehow.

Elzar, bustling in with a tray, found her laving her face with cold water, then beginning to brush her hair.

"Aint yo' goin' to bed, Mees Jane ? " she asked.
" Yo' must be tired."

" I'm not very tired," said Jane. " And I could not sleep. Besides, I must begin my unpacking and take up my work again."

She fought hard during the rest of that day for her old cheerful philosophy ; she went for a long walk across the desert, but even the desert failed her. Her heart ached.

" To-morrow," she said. " To-morrow, with the new day it will be different. Each day is a step forward. One must take the road whether one will it so or otherwise."

To-morrow came and the next day, bringing many duties.

She fought hard to slip back into the old groove, to take up her life at Nyasha at the point where over a year ago it had broken off.

But something else seemed to have broken too. The skeins were awry and the threads tangled. She came to understand in some measure how her stepmother and her stepsisters had been alienated from the ways of the Far North.

The boys filed in just the same, yet not the same.

Although her outer self seemed the same self of yesteryear, Jane found herself, though understanding still, shut off from them in some vague way. She seemed to stand on the other side of a gulf, or as one outside a house of festivity, no longer able to enter, and without desire.

" You're not changed a bit," they said to her, and perhaps only two people, Silas Dunkley and Sandy McDougall, knew that she had changed.

Jane played her part well. She took up her old life, and took up also a burden with it that sometimes weighed her to the earth. But that came in hours when her door was shut and the house wrapped in slumber ; when only the flame of Jane's taper wavered in her room.

Bernard Smith saw that faint light, lighting up the holland blind, many a night. Jane never knew how often he walked the silent road in the depth of night. He too was taking up life again ; he too took his burden with him.

Folk say that the burden slips soonest from the shoulders of men. Maybe. But Bernard Smith bore his for a long time. He never forgot Jane Dunkley, though in the years to come little children clamoured on his knees, and another woman called him husband. This thing happens often in the world.

The days dragged for Jane. The only golden thread that ran through them, a thread, very very slender, but shining, was the news that drifted from the Sea-Farm, sometimes through the medium of the cheery doctor or through grim Sandy.

" His lordship is improving very fast," the

doctor would say, his tired eyes twinkling. "The matron in a frilled muslin apron and something that looks to me like a boudoir cap, looks charming, but slightly impatient. They want two things especially."

"And those?" asked Jane, busily dusting an already spotless counter.

"The first that Sandy, who persists in acting as general overseer, should be gathered to the land of his fathers, and the second that young Warde may be well enough to catch the *Orama* in two weeks."

"And will he?" asked Jane in a low voice. She was sorting papers under the counter now, stacking them on the floor for some obscure reason or other.

"Oh, he will be well enough to make the journey southward by then; that is the worst part of the journey anyway, from here to Perth," the doctor said carelessly.

He looked at Jane's brown head, bent over the papers. The sun turned it to rippling red.

"I suppose," he added thoughtfully, "he will put Nyasha and every one in it quite out of his life. Queer thing when you think of it, Jane. D'you know I'll never be able to think of him as anything else but Curly Warde. We haven't any time or place in Nyasha for real live lords and ladies, Jane."

"No."

"There's no draperies about Life here, Jane. It's a bit of the world as God made it, and we're as God made us. We haven't any time or use for polish or veneer. We're independent because we haven't learned to think it civilised to bow the knee and scrape to any man. Nyasha won't have

done Warde any harm if it has swept aside moth-eaten curtains and shown him bare truths, and that we are all ants in face of the Infinite, no one man better than another save if he has proved himself worthy."

The sunlight still danced on Jane's bent head. The shining waves of her coppery hair caught all the light from the wide window with its fresh mosquito netting screen.

"But mind you, that woman who is going to marry him whether he wants to or not, will spoil things for him, I'm afraid."

Jane took a long while to sort out the accumulation of newspapers in the post-office that day. When she had finished that task she set herself another. From top to bottom the long rows of shelves were tidied and dusted. All day Jane worked, and all day she tried to shut one sentence from her mind. But it went on repeating itself over and over. It would not be silenced even in the dreams of a restless night. Like a grey ghost it fluttered into the room with the dawn, and kept beside Jane and whispered over and over :

"In little over a week . . ."

And again : "The woman who is going to marry him . . ."

Three days afterwards Sandy McDougall came into the post-office. He nodded to Jane.

"It's a great mornin'."

"Fine," said Jane. She went to the window and looked out as if to have a closer view. The sunlight lay on the grass. Across the way, on the fence, the budding creeper was bursting here and there into

points of flame, unrolling from slim green sheaths.
The wind stirred among the patch of mignonette.

"Hae ye any labels, Jane?" McDougall asked casually.

"Labels," Jane turned quietly.

"Aye, the sort for pastin' on bags an' boxes."

"Are you going away, Sandy?" Her voice trembled ever so slightly.

"Mebbe I'll be going down as far as the mainland, but the labels are not for Sandy McDougall." He brought a plug of tobacco out of his pocket and began to cut it in preparation for a smoke.

Jane was a little pale, but her chin was set grimly.

"Then it is Mr. Warde who is leaving."

"Mr Warde, otherwise his Lordship of some heathenish county or other," said Sandy. "And the ladies are gangin' too."

"And you want some labels." Jane turned and began to hunt for them among the shelves.

"Aye."

She found them and brought them back to him.

"Hae ye no word," he said without looking at her, "that ye'll be sendin' a message of any kind."

"I have no message," said Jane quietly. "How many labels, Sandy? There are a dozen in this box, half a dozen in that."

"I'll take the wee box." He watched Jane tie the box around with string so that the lid should not slip and the labels be scattered in the capacious shirt pocket in whose depths he subsequently bestowed it. Her profile was very still, just the faintest colour

wavered in the cheek nearest him. "Then I'll just say good-bye for ye, lassie," he said carelessly, moving to the door.

He reached it, was passing over its threshold before Jane said :

"Then you will all be going by the mainland route, maybe."

"Aye ; the boat goes in two days."

"It's a little sooner than was expected isn't it ?" She was leaning her elbows on the counter looking past him where the mignonette waved in the sun-light.

"He's aye so much better," said Sandy. "Would insist in getting up and trying to walk about the room. Where there's a will there's a way, say I, and he managed it weel for a beginning. Well, I must be going."

He began to move off, expecting that Jane's voice would follow. But it did not. As he passed slowly out on to the road to where his horse was tethered to the branch of a red gum-tree, the only sound was that of the noisy starlings quarrelling in the spouting of the post-office verandah. When he looked back he saw that Jane at the counter was still looking out at the mignonette.

She was still there when a new customer came to Dunkley's Stores and entered the post-office.

The newcomer looked at Jane coldly, frowning as she asked rather sharply for stamps and envelopes. With a spot of colour on both cheeks Jane served her.

She was suddenly conscious of the faded print frock she wore, and the holland overall spotlessly

clean but torn, of the dainty beauty of Muriel Wright, in her fresh muslin gown of many frills.

"Have you a table here where I might write?" Lady Wright's voice was cold, tinged with haughtiness.

"You may use the room behind this," said Jane quietly. She opened the door. "You will find pen and ink on the writing desk in the corner." She went back into the shop again.

Muriel looked around her in curiosity, half contempt. She went over to a framed portrait of the second Mrs. Dunkley and raised her eyebrows as she gazed at it. The photograph of Gwendoline in an evening gown seemed to interest her.

She came suddenly out to Jane, holding the portrait in her hand.

"Is this Jane?" she said almost rudely, with a nod at the photograph.

The girl in the holland overall coloured.

"It is my sister Gwen," she said.

The visitor frowned.

"She is very pretty," she remarked sharply.

"Allow me," said Jane. She held out her hand for the photograph, and taking it back into the sitting-room replaced it in its frame. She did this with a quiet grace and a direct simplicity of action that compelled attention.

The woman shrugged her shoulders as Jane came back and, passing behind the counter, began to do some duty or other as if nothing had happened.

"I don't think I shall write here after all," said Muriel Wright. She yawned.

"Very well, madam."

The woman shrugged her shoulders again. "And which of the family is Jane?" she asked. There was hidden mockery in her voice :

The spots of colour gleamed in Jane's cheeks, but she said quite quietly.

"I am Jane Dunkley."

"You!"

Muriel Wright turned and looked at her for a long moment. "You!" she said again, and, drawing a breath as of relief, laughed. "I have heard a great deal of you," she said in that mocking, cruel voice. "So you are Jane. I thought it must be that girl of the photograph."

Without speaking Jane, looked at her. She had her head held very high. The broad lath of sunshine from the window rippled it with gold here and there. In her old faded frock and holland overall Jane stood there proud and silent, her eyes cold as those of Muriel Wright's resting upon her visitor.

"So you are Jane," the latter said. She hesitated a moment as if to say something, then with an insolent shrug of her shoulders turned back to the counter, took up the telegraph forms and began to write.

"Can this," she said looking up, "go at once?"

"Immediately you have finished writing it, madam."

"Very well. It is a cable to England. How does it go? You have no cable transmission here have you."

"It goes by telephone to the mainland post-office; there is a branch connection there to Broome, from Broome to Perth, and thence by cable overseas."

"I see."

For a moment there was no sound save that of the pen.

Jane waited.

The woman on the other side of the counter read it over several times, altered it here and there, and at last recopied it.

"Will you see if you can read it," she said coldly, "and please see that it goes at once. It is important."

"Very well, madam." Jane took the message. "Shall I read it to you in case there is any correction needed?"

"Yes," curtly.

Jane read it aloud in a quiet voice that never trembled, and the hands that held the thin strip of paper never trembled either.

The two spots of colour died away out of her face and left it pale, that was all.

"Yes, I think that will do," the woman said thoughtfully. "You will send it at once?"

"At once, madam."

She went over to the telephone in the distant corner, carrying the paper with her. At the counter Muriel Wright lingered a moment.

"Mainland." Jane was signalling. "Mainland," and then her voice clear and steady. "Is that you, mainland? Yes. Nyasha speaking. Will you take this cable for transmission? Thank you."

There was no move of the quiet figure at the telephone board. Without her will or volition she found herself speaking to that thin shrill voice at the end of the wire.

"Ready." And then the address in England, to some woman friend of the sender no doubt.

"Lord, but you've some style there," shrilled the voice of the mainland operator. "Turn it out then, slowly, because the line's a bit out of order."

Very carefully Jane read out the message, word after word, repeating it when finished.

At the other end of the wire, it seemed at the other end of the world, the thin shrill voice repeated it also.

"Lionel and I and mother returning by Orama; thanks for congratulations."

So the message began to wing its way across the world, but it travelled first through the heart of Jane Dunkley.

And the woman by the counter, looking at the girl as she turned, laughed lightly at the proud poise of the head. Her cool eyes drifted from Jane's head to her feet in a sweeping, comprehensive glance.

Across the space of the room the eyes of the two women met.

"So you are Jane," said Muriel, and laughed again. The echo of her laugh trailed after her as she went.

Jane made no answer. Her grey eyes, very proud and cold, stared out of the door, for a long while without seeing anything; very gradually the blur of sunshine and white sand passed away, and she found herself looking at the patch of mignonette.

A sudden spasm of pain contracted her face. She seemed to lose all her pride and assurance and grow old and broken all at once, as she stood there watching the sunlight pass from the mignonette as the shadows lengthened.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT last there was left but a little wavering space of sunlight, filtering through the tree-tops on to the dusty road.

Jane watching it, said dully to herself :

“ In a little while it will be gone—the sunlight will be gone.”

She turned then and went indoors.

Along the road in the hush of the dying day, there came the sound of wheels, drawing steadily nearer.

Jane neither heard nor heeded when they ceased abruptly, almost at the very door of the post-office. She saw only that a shadow fell athwart the window, that something paused between the verandah and the last inflowing rays of the dying sun.

The stamping of a horse’s hoof, the sound of Sandy McDougall’s voice without, apparently in conversation with some one, passed her by vaguely.

So she was standing by the counter, very still and very pale, when Lionel Warde came in.

He came painfully and slowly, leaning heavily on a stick, and when he came over the threshold and saw

her standing there, with eyes that saw nothing, he cried her name aloud.

"Jane," he said, and again "Jane."

He saw by the suffering of her face that the bitter poison of lies had done its work, by the dazed way in which she looked at him for the moment without understanding, or as if he were called out of a dream in which her agonised thoughts moved aimlessly and with little meaning save that of pain.

He came slowly to the counter and leaning against it put out one hand to hers that were clasped so loosely and wearily before her.

"Jane," he said again, half whispering.

And Jane, without looking at him, answered the question in his voice.

"I wouldn't have minded," she said oddly, "if she hadn't come. Why did she come? There was no need."

"Then—she came here—to you—to-day." His hand clenched suddenly, and his mouth set in a firm line. Something in his voice woke Jane from her apathy. "Then—old McDougall was right after all." Bitterness came into his voice now. He leaned across the counter towards her. His eyes demanded answer. "Jane," he said, "why did you refuse to answer my letter yesterday?"

"I never received any letter," the girl's voice fluttered as she stared at him.

He had drawn himself up suddenly. Something strange came into his voice.

"You received no letter?" he said slowly.

"No."

" You mean to say that you received no letter yesterday from me . . . "

She shook her head, her lips quivering.

He put one hand to his brow thinking, suddenly it dropped to his side in a gesture full of meaning.

" So that is it ! " he said, half aloud. " She lied then. God ! If she has lied to me all through."

The bitter mists of disillusionment unwrapped him for a moment. Through it he heard Jane's voice.

" Will you please go now," it said huskily. Very slowly its owner began to make her way towards the separating door that led into the room beyond, a sanctuary where one might suffer alone.

It seemed a long way to the door. When Jane Dunkley reached it another hand than hers opened it, another passed in beside her.

When she sank weakly into a chair he dropped painfully on his knees beside her. He took her hands from her face, held them fast in his strong clasp.

He spoke with all his heart in his voice. " Dear ! Have we been believing hard things of each other, through the treachery of another ? Is it that, Jane ? Look at me, dearie."

Gently he turned her face towards him, looked deep into her grey eyes in which the tears were brimming slowly.

" Did it matter so much, Jane ? " he said, and now a thrill rose and grew in his voice. He drew her brown head down to his shoulder, held her fast there as if he would never let her go.

" Nothing else is going to part us, sweetheart,"

he said. "Nothing." All else slipped away in that moment.

"But—I am not worthy," whispered Jane. "I am not of your kind. Oh, it is all impossible! This is only a dream that will last just a little while. Then you will go away. I would not have it otherwise, because it must be so. I am glad—glad that you came; it will be something always to remember. I shall not be lonely with this memory."

He smoothed her rippling hair with one hand tenderly. The other arm held her close. There was a catch in his voice when he spoke. "You shall never be lonely again, dear," he said. He bent and kissed her lips. "There is no other woman in all the world for me but you, Jane. You have crept into my heart so that I could never turn you out from your place there even if I would. I need you, Jane. I cannot do without you."

He bent his head low to hear her whisper.

A shrill voice broke the silence suddenly:

"Very charmin' scene, but rather compromisin', Lionel," said the voice. Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright, blocking the doorway for a thrilling second, stepped into the room now. She looked scornfully at Jane's startled face.

Warde, rising to his feet, drew Jane with him. He held her more closely—that was all. His eyes went to Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright in interrogation as to her unannounced presence in the room, and the reason for her remaining.

Under that glance of inquiry Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright perceptibly wilted; her ruddy face went perceptibly paler.

"This is so very foolish, Lionel," she began to protest hurriedly, avoiding his eye and fumbling for a handkerchief. "So—so very lowerin' to your position too."

She cast a hurried glance in the direction of the shop from whence came the sound of footsteps and the *frou-frou* of a gown.

"An' just when everything was practically settled," she went on irrelevantly. "Lionel, Muriel will be in here in a moment. Think of her feelin's . . . If that young person——"

There came a light tap in the doorway. Neither moved. With a glare at "that young person" Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright said helplessly, "Come in, Muriel."

Muriel came in: stepped across the threshold, smiling, her high-heeled shoes tick-tacking on the wooden floor. The smile died suddenly from her face when she turned from the resigned horror of her mother's face to Warde.

"We shall be late, Lionel," she began, then stopped abruptly.

A slow flush crept up to the very roots of her golden hair. She held her head high.

"What does this mean?" Her voice was not quite steady. For all her bravado and poise of hauteur, she was trembling.

"It means," said Warde quietly, but grimly, "that you and your mother are intruding, Muriel."

She stared at him, and the flush died from her face and left it a flat, dead white.

"You are joking, Lionel," she said shrilly. "And —

this is hardly the time or place for a joke of that nature——”

He interrupted her quickly. “ I prefer to think that you are joking, Muriel, under the circumstances. There is no necessity for you to remain any longer as you are catching the boat in a few hours. Don’t let me detain you.”

“ You are not going ! ” cried Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright in shrill consternation. The lines showed in her face, ageing her. Her mouth opened, sagged ludicrously. All at once she began to cry copiously.

“ Don’t be such a fool, mother ! ” flashed Muriel, sharply and contemptuously. She seemed to lose all her pretty feminine ways in that moment. The beauty of her face became hard and bitter.

She flung round at Warde.

“ Then—I am to understand, that you are not going back with us ? Why ? Why ? ”

“ I think it would be better for us all if a different plan were arranged.” He spoke now in a low level voice, but a thread of subdued anger lurked in it. “ I prefer not to see you for a considerable while, Muriel, after what you did yesterday.”

She flinched. “ I did it to save you from this mad infatuation,” she cried furiously. “ Yes, I tore the letter up. I wanted to save you from being the laughing stock of your friends.”

Then her voice changed, became pleading. She came nearer, ignoring Jane.

“ Lionel ! ” she begged. “ Forgive me. Come away with us on this boat and think over things. Come back to England and get the right point of view.”

He felt Jane quiver in the circle of his arm.

"I have already received the gift," he said, "of looking at things from the right point of view. Nyasha gave me that gift, Muriel." He looked straight into her eyes as he spoke. "It has taught me many lessons, and, above all else, to discern the true from the sham, happiness from that which passes as happiness."

In the background Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright was sobbing audibly.

"So," he went on quietly, "I can no longer look at things as I once looked at them. I have trodden a dark and bitter road of suffering, but I am come at last to its ending, please God. On the new road there is hope and happiness; and there is but one woman in the world can share that road with me."

"And—that—woman?" said Muriel, with a catch in her breath. She bent forward, the beauty of her alluring face very near.

"That woman," he said quietly, "is Jane Dunkley, my future wife." He bent and whispered something to the girl within his arm; and Jane raised her head.

The tears shone in her eyes.

He released her and went towards the door. He held it wide open.

"Please go," he said quietly.

Muriel went to him holding out her hands. Before the sternness and the judgment that came into his own, her face whitened.

She had hesitated a moment fighting for words, then suddenly with head upflung, she passed

out ; Mrs. Wilmington-Cartwright followed, sniffing audibly. The door closed behind them.

" Jane," said Warde.

* * * * *

On a day towards the end of summer two people said good-bye to Nyasha for a space of time, that might be brief or long.

When the fussy little coastal boat chugged its way noisily to the thin black pier at Nyasha it found a great crowd gathered—a crowd that laughed and cheered and snowed the gangway with rice.

As the boat moved slowly off, Jane of Dunkley's, in a trim blue gown, leaned against the railing and waved her hand frantically. The pier became a blur of black and fluttering white as Jane, with happy tears, turned to her husband.

His hand closed over the little white-gloved hand that rested on the rail.

A big grizzled Scotchman on the wharf elbowed his way to the very edge of the wharf. He waved the huge straw hat with its cork fringe. Jane saw one little group last of all : her father's face smiling a little wistfully, the second Mrs. Dunkley in a gown that screamed its hue to the very heavens, Gwendoline with her baby in her arms, and the dark, smiling countenance of old Elzar—and behind, that crowd of all crowds to Jane, the " boys " of Nyasha.

" Good-bye Curley," they bellowed out over the fast widening stretch of water. " Look after yourself an' good luck to you . . . Good-bye, Jane, old girl—" And Jane, Countess of Mountshields, waving her handkerchief until the curve of the

headland swung them out of sight, answered, "Good-bye, boys."

The water foamed in a long rippling furrow, widening out, and the boat turned round the headland. High on the hill a house looked down over the waters, its windows facing seawards. From one of the windows, as Jane's handkerchief waved, came an answering flutter.

No voice hailed or called out hearty greeting, but Jane knew that the very wind that blew by her carried the message of one man.

The wind touched her cheek as she turned for one last look at Nyasha, receding and dimming in the distance, then back to the man at her side.

"Look!" he said, "at the sun on the sea. It is like a path before us, Jane."

And so they turned their faces towards it.

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